The Guest List (Lucy Foley)

The Guest List by Lucy Foley is a thriller set at a remote wedding, where secrets and tensions culminate in a murder.

Hannah: The Plus-One

The Plus-One moves through the wedding reception, absorbing the chaotic mix of celebration and hidden tensions that simmer beneath the surface. The ushers, led by Peter Ramsay, make an entrance so boisterous that it teeters on disaster, their antics veering between comedy and calamity as they tumble into a heap of laughter and spilled drinks. The lively atmosphere of the evening is infectious, but Hannah senses an undercurrent of discomfort beneath the revelry, an awareness that not all joy is untainted. As she observes the unfolding scenes, her gaze keeps returning to her husband, Charlie, who appears unusually tense, his demeanor flickering between forced cheerfulness and restrained unease. The weight of an unspoken burden is evident in his stiff posture, the way his laughter rings hollow amidst the genuine mirth around him. Her intuition tells her something is wrong, but she isn’t prepared for the truth that will soon unfold.

The moment of revelation comes suddenly, catalyzed by an unexpected confrontation between Charlie and Duncan, one of the groom’s closest friends. What begins as a minor exchange quickly escalates into something heavier, drawing the attention of nearby guests as words turn sharp and tempers flare. Hannah, standing just close enough to overhear, feels the ground beneath her shift as Charlie, under pressure, begins to unravel a secret he has carried for too long. He speaks of a stag night gone wrong, an evening that was meant to be filled with harmless fun but instead spiraled

into humiliation and regret. The combination of alcohol, magic mushrooms, and the reckless camaraderie of men behaving badly had led to Charlie being abandoned in the cold, left to wander alone through an unfamiliar landscape, lost in both a physical and emotional sense. His voice trembles slightly as he recounts the isolation he felt that night—not just from his so-called friends but also from himself, realizing how little control he had over his own place within the group.

But the confession doesn't end there. As the conversation deepens, Charlie reluctantly admits that the alienation he felt that night drove him toward a moment of betrayal—one that Hannah never saw coming. In a haze of intoxication and self-pity, he had sought comfort in the arms of another woman, and not just any woman—Jules, the bride. The impact of his words strikes Hannah like a physical blow, the wedding celebration around her suddenly feeling unbearably loud, unbearably bright, as if the entire room has tilted on its axis. The sting of betrayal is immediate, but so is the slow, creeping realization that their marriage, which she had believed was steady despite its imperfections, was far more fragile than she had understood. She searches Charlie's face for remorse, for an explanation that might dull the ache in her chest, but all she finds is exhaustion—a man who has carried guilt for so long that it has become a part of him, worn like a second skin.

The juxtaposition of the wedding's festivities against the rawness of Charlie's confession underscores the strange duality of human relationships—the way joy and heartbreak can exist within the same breath. Hannah, caught between fury and grief, stands at the precipice of an uncertain future, unsure whether forgiveness is even an option. Around her, the party continues unabated, oblivious to the quiet destruction unfolding in her heart. The guests laugh, drink, and dance, their world untouched by the fracture that has just split her reality in two. And yet, despite the pain, there is a clarity in this moment—an understanding that nothing, no matter how carefully built, is immune to the weight of hidden truths. As she watches Charlie, standing before her like a man drowning in his own regrets, Hannah realizes that this night, intended to be a celebration of love, has instead become a reckoning, forcing her to confront the foundation of her own marriage and whether it is strong enough to withstand the

storm.



Now: The wedding night

The chapter opens with the unsettling image of a waitress regaining consciousness, her body trembling as she struggles to process the disorienting experience she has just endured. Though physically unscathed, she is incapable of forming coherent words, emitting only fragmented sounds and weak moans, her distress palpable to those gathered around her. The scene unfolds during **the wedding night**, housed in an opulent marquee filled with lively music, flowing drinks, and elegant decorations. The venue is divided into distinct sections—dining tables adorned with candlelight, a dance floor alive with movement, and a bustling bar—each creating an atmosphere of indulgence and revelry. Yet, the physical separation of these spaces means that not all guests are immediately aware of the turmoil beginning to spread through the event. As the realization of an incident dawns upon them, the mood shifts, **the wedding night's** carefree energy slowly dissipating into an undercurrent of unease.

At the center of the commotion is the head waitress, a young woman herself, who is visibly shaken as she attempts to explain what little she knows. She reveals that the distressed waitress had been sent to the Folly, a secluded part of the estate, to retrieve additional bottles of champagne. What should have been a simple errand has instead left her in a state of shock, returning as a mere shadow of herself, unable to articulate what happened. The guests begin exchanging uneasy glances, their curiosity giving way to concern as they take stock of their surroundings and search for any missing companions. A few, still dazed from the festivities and alcohol, are slow to grasp the seriousness of the situation. Others, however, instinctively sense that something far more sinister may have occurred, their gazes flickering toward the darkness beyond the marquee's warm glow.

Whispers of speculation ripple through the crowd as they attempt to rationalize the waitress's condition. One guest suggests that the storm, now intensifying outside,

could have startled her, the howling winds and oppressive darkness playing tricks on her mind. Another, less convinced, voices the possibility that she encountered something—or someone—that left her in a state of silent terror. Tension tightens its grip on the gathering, but before panic can set in, the wedding planner takes charge, her presence a stark contrast to the growing chaos. Though her voice is measured, there is an undeniable edge of apprehension as she urges caution, warning against rash decisions that could put others at risk. She reminds them of the island's treacherous landscape—its unguarded cliffs, deep bogs, and unpredictable terrain—all of which pose serious dangers to anyone who ventures out unprepared. Her words carry weight, momentarily quelling the impulse for immediate action, yet they do little to dispel the growing sense of dread hanging over the night.

The once-glamorous atmosphere of the wedding is now tinged with an eerie stillness, as if the very island itself is holding its breath. What began as a night of joy and celebration has taken on an ominous new shape, the contrast between light and darkness becoming more pronounced. Guests who once danced with abandon now huddle together in hushed groups, their laughter replaced with murmurs of uncertainty. The marquee, once a sanctuary of indulgence, now feels like a fragile cocoon shielding them from something lurking just beyond its borders. The chapter

closes with a lingering sense of unease, as the storm outside rages on, its winds rattling the fabric of the marquee like an unspoken warning. The guests, now sobered by fear, wrestle with the uncertainty of what has transpired, their minds filled with questions but devoid of answers. Though the wedding planner maintains her composed exterior, even she cannot shake the feeling that this night has shifted irrevocably—that something beyond their control has already been set into motion.

Aoife: The Wedding Planner

The Wedding Planner had carefully orchestrated every detail, but now, in the eerie quiet of the night, Aoife and Freddy are jolted by an unsettling noise that cuts through the stillness. The sound seems to blur the lines between human and something altogether more otherworldly, reverberating through the darkened landscape of the island. The wedding festivities, which had earlier filled the air with music and laughter, have long since ended, and all the guests have retreated to their quarters, leaving behind only the faint echo of whispers carried on the wind. As the night thickens, Aoife and Freddy are left alone in the house, their senses heightened by the strange, almost unnatural sounds that continue to float in the air. Freddy, ever the rational one, attempts to interpret the noise, translating the Latin words he believes he's heard. However, Aoife feels an icy shiver run down her spine at the eerie familiarity of the sound. It's as though the chanting carries with it a weight of ominous foretelling, something lurking just beyond the veil of the present. Aoife can't help but think back to past experiences, where grand, seemingly flawless events had devolved into chaos. In her mind, the mixture of tightly controlled high society with the island's untamed, almost anarchic energy, seems to create a volatile cocktail, one that invites mischief and danger in equal measure. This unsettling blend sets the stage for the strange events that follow.

Unwilling to ignore the eerie disturbance any longer, Aoife, driven by both a sense of duty and an ingrained sense of curiosity, makes the decision to investigate. Freddy, although concerned, hesitates, content to let her handle it while remaining safely inside. Aoife, on the other hand, is no stranger to adversity. Her years of experience have taught her to face the unknown head-on, even when it means venturing into the blackness of the night without the aid of artificial light. She knows that this kind of darkness will tell her things the light cannot. As she walks through the hushed island

landscape, she senses the quiet is almost too thick, as if the very earth is holding its breath. The sounds of the island, once familiar, now seem alien to her as she moves closer to the source. The sobbing that punctuates the wind-driven silence sharpens her focus, and her every step becomes more deliberate, more cautious. Her senses, finely tuned from years of managing both the mundane and the extraordinary, detect a fleeting shadow near the outbuildings—an odd movement that sparks her instincts. In that moment, Aoife is on high alert, her trained eye picking up on the subtle nuances of the night, something she's done countless times when managing the unpredictable.

Her mind briefly flashes to the island's ghost stories—tales she's heard countless times from locals and visitors alike. For a fleeting moment, Aoife allows herself to entertain the thought that perhaps she's encountered a spirit, something lost in time, drifting through the island. But as she nears the source of the sound, her expectations are shattered. The figure she sees isn't a ghostly apparition, but rather the best man, slumped against the wall, his face streaked with the signs of excessive drinking and emotional turmoil. His disheveled appearance, so stark against the quiet night, makes Aoife pause. The sorrow and intoxication he exudes initially create a feeling of disorientation, but Aoife's pragmatism quickly takes over. This is no myth or legend, but a person in distress, and Aoife's concern shifts from the supernatural to the very real human issues that are unfolding before her. The presence of the best man, in a state of despair, stands in sharp contrast to the eerie, folklore-inspired visions that had briefly gripped her. Her first instinct is to make sure he is safe, knowing well the dangers of wandering the island's outskirts in such a state. The old farm machinery stored in the outbuildings looms as a reminder of the very real physical risks that are just as present as the mythical threats whispered about in the island's past.

Her conversation with the best man centers around his safety, highlighting the stark reality of the situation. Aoife's thoughts shift from the eerie and supernatural to the tangible and present. She reminds him, with a calm but firm tone, that the island is not just steeped in legends, but also fraught with real dangers. As she carefully assesses his state, Aoife feels the weight of the island's reputation as a "place of death," a term locals use when speaking of its mysterious and sometimes dangerous history. This

mixture of folklore and real-world threats creates a tension that Aoife is acutely aware of. The haunting atmosphere of the island, combined with the very real hazards it presents, creates a complex web that Aoife must navigate with both sensitivity and practical action. In the end, her concern for the best man’s safety, paired with her pragmatic approach, underscores the theme of finding balance between the mythical and the real.



Earlier that day: Olivia: The Bridesmaid

Earlier in the day, The Bridesmaid, Olivia, moves through the wedding marquee with a singular focus—to drink enough to dull the relentless emotions that refuse to leave her alone. As The Bridesmaid, she is expected to share in the joy of the celebration, to stand by her sister Jules and smile for the photographs, but the weight of her own turmoil is too great to mask completely. She skirts the edges of the party, avoiding conversations and instead collecting half-finished drinks from abandoned tables, downing them quickly as if each sip will erase the past. The bitterness of alcohol lingers on her tongue, but nothing is as bitter as the memories she is desperately trying to suppress. Will's presence at the wedding is an unavoidable reminder of what she wants to forget, his charm acting as a thin veneer over the cruelty she has come to recognize. Their earlier dance, meant to be nothing more than a polite formality, had instead become a suffocating confrontation, punctuated by his warning that the past must remain buried.

The dance floor is alive with the energy of guests reliving their younger years, moving to nostalgic music with an abandon that Olivia cannot relate to. The contrast between their carefree movements and the storm brewing within her makes her feel even more disconnected from the world around her. She notices the waitstaff—young, disinterested, and clearly unimpressed by the extravagance of the event—and in their quiet judgment, she finds an unexpected sense of camaraderie. They, too, see the artifice of the night, the forced smiles, and the polished perfection that hides the flaws beneath. But Olivia’s detachment is not just observational; it is deeply personal, exacerbated by the unwanted attention of certain male guests emboldened by alcohol and the looseness of the evening. The casualness with which they invade her space, the way their hands linger too long on her waist or brush against her arm without invitation, fuels her discomfort. Each encounter is another reminder of how little

control she has over her own existence, and the frustration festers beneath her skin like a slow-burning fire.

As the night wears on, Olivia leans harder into the numbness that alcohol provides, chasing an oblivion that remains just out of reach. She wants to disappear into the crowd, to blend into the haze of laughter and music, but her body betrays her, swaying unsteadily under the weight of exhaustion and inebriation. A fleeting reunion with her cousin Beth on the dance floor offers a brief reprieve from her downward spiral. Beth's presence, familiar and grounding, momentarily lifts her from the fog, but the reprieve is short-lived. In an instant, Olivia missteps, her heel catching on the uneven floor, and suddenly, she is falling. The impact is jarring, sending her sprawling to the ground in a graceless heap, her dress pooling around her like a broken promise. Gasps ripple through the crowd, heads turning in her direction, and for the first time that evening, Olivia is undeniably seen—but not in the way she wants.

Beth is the first to react, kneeling beside Olivia, her voice filled with concern as she calls for help. But Olivia barely registers the words, her mind swimming in a haze of alcohol and shame. The weight of the stares pressing down on her is suffocating, each pair of eyes a silent accusation, a reminder that she has failed to hold herself together. Her hands tremble as she tries to push herself upright, but the effort feels monumental, as if she is sinking into the floor itself. Someone reaches out to help her, but she recoils instinctively, unwilling to accept kindness when all she feels is humiliation. Beth's worry deepens as she looks at Olivia, sensing that this is more than just drunken clumsiness—that something far more insidious is gnawing at her cousin from the inside out.

The wedding carries on around them, the music and laughter resuming as though nothing has happened, but for Olivia, the night has irrevocably shifted. The illusion she has spent the entire evening trying to maintain has shattered, leaving her exposed and vulnerable in a way she never intended. No amount of alcohol can erase the past, nor can it silence the voice in her head telling her that she will never outrun the truth. Will's warning still lingers in her mind, a sinister whisper reminding her that she is

trapped, that her secrets are not hers to reveal. As she sits on the cold ground, surrounded by celebration yet utterly alone, Olivia realizes with a sinking certainty that she has already lost—because Will was right. The past is not something she can escape; it is something that will follow her, no matter how much she tries to drown it.



Olivia: The Bridesmaid

The weight of the evening settles heavily on *the bridesmaid* Olivia's shoulders as she drifts further from the wedding's revelry, drawn to the quiet solitude the island offers. The distant laughter and clinking of glasses fade behind her, swallowed by the wind as she moves through the darkened landscape. She has spent much of the night on the outskirts, lingering at the edges of conversations, forcing polite smiles, pretending to enjoy the moment while feeling entirely detached. The wedding is supposed to be a celebration, a grand display of love and unity, yet to the bridesmaid, it only highlights how adrift she feels—how separate she has always been. As she walks through the island's abandoned houses, their broken windows and weathered facades whispering of forgotten lives, she sees a reflection of herself in their hollowed-out remains. They are remnants of something that once held purpose but now stand empty, their foundations eroded by time, much like the sense of belonging she once thought she had.

The cold air bites at her skin as she continues onward, her thoughts drawn to memories of Charlie, a boy who once occupied so much of her heart. He had been her secret crush, the kind of infatuation that lived in stolen glances and imagined moments, never acknowledged, never reciprocated. Seeing him now, older but not necessarily wiser, married and yet seemingly just as restless, unsettles something deep inside her. He had been the embodiment of confidence back then, always at the center of attention, laughing too loudly, moving through life as though the world had been shaped for his convenience. But as she watches him from afar, his easy charm no longer feels quite so effortless, and the illusion of who he was begins to crumble. The realization is jarring—how often do we hold onto people as we once saw them, rather than who they have become? Perhaps even more unsettling is the thought that she has done the same with herself, clinging to old versions of her identity that no longer

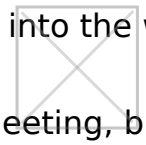
fit.

Needing space to breathe, Olivia finds herself heading toward the Whispering Cave, a hidden enclave on the island that few know about but many fear. The wind rushes through its narrow passageways, creating an eerie chorus of murmurs, as though the cave itself is alive with secrets. The sound unsettles her, yet it feels fitting—a place where the past and present seem to blur, where whispers fill the empty spaces just as they do in her mind. She steps inside, the darkness swallowing her whole, allowing herself a rare moment of raw vulnerability. Here, there is no need for pretense, no expectation to perform, just the quiet confrontation of her own thoughts. She recalls the sting of her recent breakup, the way it unraveled so painfully, leaving her with a hollow ache that refuses to fade. It was not just the end of a relationship; it was the confirmation of a fear she had always carried—that she is difficult to love, easy to leave.

She leans against the cave wall, pressing her palms into the cold stone as if grounding herself in something solid. The walls feel ancient, bearing the weight of time in their jagged edges, much like the heaviness she carries within. The silence is comforting until it is suddenly broken by the sound of footsteps approaching. Olivia tenses, her solitude shattered, but when the figure emerges into the dim light, she exhales. It’s Hannah, Charlie’s wife. For a moment, they simply stare at each other, the unlikeliness of this encounter stretching between them. Olivia wonders why Hannah is here, whether she too is looking for an escape, or if she has followed her out of curiosity. But there is no judgment in Hannah’s gaze, only something quiet, something knowing. They are different in so many ways, yet in this moment, Olivia senses a shared understanding, a silent recognition of being outsiders at an event that demands they belong.

Without words, Hannah offers her a cigarette, and Olivia takes it, their fingers brushing briefly in the exchange. The flick of the lighter casts a glow between them, illuminating their faces in flickering light, highlighting the exhaustion in their eyes. Smoke curls into the air, filling the space between them, and with each exhale, Olivia feels the tension

in her chest loosen just slightly. Their conversation is unhurried, each sentence carefully measured, neither of them feeling the need to fill the silence with empty words. They speak of the wedding in vague terms, their places within it, the roles they are expected to play. Olivia admits, in a quiet voice, that she has never quite felt like she belonged, not just here, but anywhere. Hannah nods, her expression unreadable, but there is an agreement in her silence, a mutual understanding that neither of them fit as seamlessly into the world as they are supposed to.



The moment is fleeting, but for Olivia, it lingers—this brief companionship, this acknowledgment of loneliness shared. Hannah leaves first, disappearing back into the night, back to her place among the guests, and Olivia is left alone once more. Yet something about the encounter has shifted the weight in her chest, even if only slightly. As she extinguishes the last of the cigarette, watching the ember fade into darkness, she realizes that some connections, no matter how brief, are enough to remind her that she is not entirely alone. The cave still whispers around her, but now, its murmurs feel less like echoes of loss and more like reminders that even in isolation, understanding can find its way through the cracks.

Jules: The Bride

Jules’ wedding day begins like a carefully curated dream, set against the breathtaking yet wild backdrop of a cliffside ceremony. The event is meticulously planned, every detail crafted to exude elegance and perfection, reflecting her desire for control and order. Yet, as she and Will return from their private photo session, an unease settles in—something imperceptible yet undeniable, a shift in the air that makes her feel exposed in a way she hadn’t anticipated.

Though laughter and conversation fill the marquee, Jules feels distant, as if she is watching everything from the outside rather than participating. Will, who should be basking in the joy of their union, seems preoccupied, his attention drawn toward a particular guest in a way that unsettles her. She had envisioned this day as the beginning of something stable, yet already, cracks are forming, making her question if the perfection she sought was merely an illusion.

The wind whips through her hair as she forces a smile, attempting to shake off her growing discomfort. But the moment she encounters Freddy—bloodied and disheveled—it is as if reality itself conspires to strip away the polished exterior of the wedding. For a fleeting instant, she feels true fear before realizing the blood is not from an act of violence but the result of behind-the-scenes chaos, something related to the reception preparations.

Still, the moment leaves an imprint, a sharp contrast between the fantasy she had constructed and the raw unpredictability of the world around her. She longs for reassurance, for Will’s presence to ground her, yet his detachment only fuels her sense of isolation. It is not just the wind making her shiver—it is the creeping suspicion that something about this day, about Will, about everything, is not as it seems.

Before she can fully process her emotions, a commotion erupts, pulling her attention toward the sea. Murmurs of confusion quickly escalate into cries of alarm as guests rush toward the cliff's edge, their voices tinged with panic. It takes only a moment for Jules to realize what has happened—Olivia, a guest at the wedding, is fighting against the waves, her figure barely visible as she struggles to stay afloat.

The tension shifts from personal turmoil to collective urgency as people scramble to respond, their initial shock giving way to action. The once-picturesque scene is now one of chaos, the serene ocean transformed into a menacing force threatening to pull Olivia under. Jules watches, her breath catching, as the rescue unfolds, a part of her torn between genuine concern and a simmering resentment she can't quite define.

When Olivia is finally dragged to safety, gasping and drenched, she appears more wild than relieved, her presence a stark contrast to the carefully curated elegance of the wedding. Jules should feel relief that Olivia is alive, but instead, her worry morphs into something sharper—anger, frustration, and the resurgence of memories she had tried to bury. Olivia's near-drowning is not just a disruption; it is an intrusion, a reminder of past conflicts that Jules had no desire to revisit on this day of all days.

The rawness of the moment ignites something within her, an unspoken fury that simmers just beneath the surface. This was supposed to be *her* day, one of joy, stability, and fresh beginnings, yet Olivia has managed to shatter the illusion with her presence alone. As Jules stares at her, dripping and breathless, she doesn't just see a guest who nearly drowned—she sees an embodiment of everything she has tried to suppress, everything she has fought to control, and the undeniable proof that perfection is, perhaps, nothing more than a fleeting dream.

The scene lingers in the air like an unresolved storm, the tension between Jules and Olivia now an undeniable force. Even as the wedding continues, as people try to shake off the shock of the incident, something has shifted irreversibly. Beneath the thin veil of celebration, Jules knows this day is no longer just about marriage—it has become a reckoning, one that will unravel more than she is prepared to face.

Hannah: The Plus-One

The wedding reception unfolds in a dazzling blur of lights, laughter, and champagne flutes raised in celebration, yet for Hannah, a persistent unease shadows the joyous atmosphere. *The Plus-One* dynamic adds an unexpected weight to the evening—Will's speech, while polished and charming, carries an undertone she can’t quite place, as if each carefully crafted word hides a deeper, unspoken truth. As she watches him speak, commanding the room with ease, Hannah feels disconnected, her thoughts straying to her husband, Charlie. Seated apart from her, immersed in his role among the wedding party, Charlie’s absence feels more than physical—it’s an emotional chasm that has quietly grown between them, widening with each passing day. The lively conversations at her table and the unrestrained laughter of the guests provide little comfort. Instead, the noise around her serves to amplify the dissonance within, making her feel like an outsider amidst the celebration.

The air shifts when Jonathan Briggs, or Johnno as he is better known, stands to deliver the best man’s speech. There’s an almost imperceptible hesitation in Charlie’s voice as he introduces him, a brief pause that doesn’t go unnoticed by Hannah. The room quiets, anticipation building, but not all of it is eager. Johnno’s unsteady demeanor, betrayed by the slight slur in his words and the telltale flush of alcohol on his face, sets the tone for what’s to come. What starts as a typical trip down memory lane quickly veers into treacherous territory, his jokes cutting too sharply, his anecdotes laced with a bitterness that the guests can’t quite ignore. His words, meant to celebrate Will, instead seem to challenge him, painting a picture of their past that is far from the polished narrative Will has always projected. The tension in the room grows with every word, the laughter from earlier fading into uneasy murmurs as Johnno delves into stories that blur the line between humor and accusation.

The turning point comes when Johnno brings up the suit—a gesture long touted as a symbol of Will’s generosity and camaraderie. The narrative unravels as Johnno reveals the truth: the suit was no heartfelt gift but a calculated pretense, a prop in the facade of their friendship. The air in the room thickens as Johnno’s voice grows more pointed, each word a deliberate strike at the veneer of perfection Will has cultivated. The crowd shifts uncomfortably, torn between their loyalty to the groom and the uncomfortable truths being aired before them. Will’s composed smile tightens, his jaw clenching subtly, a clear sign to Hannah that the cracks in his armor are beginning to show. Yet, even as Johnno’s words dig deeper, Will maintains his carefully crafted facade, offering deflections and smooth responses that only partially mask the strain beneath.

Hannah’s gaze flickers between Will and Charlie, whose expression is unreadable as he watches the unfolding scene. The distance between them feels more pronounced now, her thoughts filled with questions she is too afraid to voice. What does Charlie make of this? Is he as uneasy as she is, or has he grown so accustomed to the unspoken complexities of their own relationship that this spectacle barely registers? Her attention returns to Johnno, who now speaks less like a best man and more like a man with unfinished business, his words no longer veiled in humor but tinged with raw emotion. The room is no longer filled with celebration but with a heavy, almost tangible tension, the kind that signals something significant has shifted, even if no one fully understands it yet.

As Johnno finally steps down, leaving behind an air of awkwardness and unresolved tension, Hannah feels a wave of discomfort settle over her. The reception continues—guests clinking glasses, music playing—but the earlier exuberance is noticeably dimmed. She can’t shake the feeling that this night, meant to symbolize love and unity, has instead become a stage for confrontation and revelation. Watching Will return to Jules, offering her a reassuring smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes, Hannah senses that the cracks in the facade of this perfect wedding are only the beginning. In the midst of the revelry, she finds herself grappling with her own reflections, not just about the spectacle unfolding before her but about the state of her own life. Weddings are meant to be a celebration of new beginnings, but tonight, they

feel like a reckoning—a moment when illusions fall away, leaving only the raw, uncomfortable truths behind.



Earlier: Will: The Groom

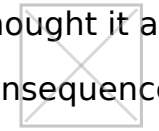
In this chapter *WILL: The Groom*, Jules and I walk back to the marquee together. I leave Olivia to make her own way. For one crazy moment there, realizing how near we were to the cliff edge, I was tempted. It wouldn't have come as that much of a surprise. She tried to drown herself earlier, after all – or that's certainly how it looked, before I saved her. And with this wind – it's really blowing a gale now – there would have been so much confusion.

But that's not me. I'm not a killer. I'm a good guy. It's all somewhat out of control, though, everything getting out of hand. I'll have to sort things out.

Obviously, I could never have told Jules about Olivia. Not by the time I made the connection between them that day at her mum's house, not when it had gone so far. What would have been the point in hurting Jules unnecessarily? The thing with Olivia – that was never going to be real, was it? It was a temporary attraction. With her, it was all based on lies, hers as much as mine. In fact, it was the pretence that got me going when we met on that date, trying to be someone she wasn't. Pretending to be older, pretending to be sophisticated. That insecurity. It made me want to corrupt her, rather like a girlfriend I had at uni once, who was one of the good girls – smart, a hard worker, who came from some crummy school and didn't think she was good enough to be there.

When I met Jules at that party, however, that was different. It was like fate. I saw how good we would be together straight away. How good we'd look together – physically, yes, but also in how well-matched we were. Me, on the brink of a promising new career, her, such a high flyer. I needed an equal, someone with self-confidence, ambition – someone like me. Together we'd be invincible. And we are.

Olivia will keep quiet, I think. I've known that since the beginning. Knew she wouldn't feel anyone would believe her. She doubts herself too much. Except – and perhaps I'm simply being paranoid – it does feel like she's changed since we've been here. Everything seems changed on this island. It's as though the place is doing it, that we've been brought here for a reason. I know that's ridiculous. It's the fact of having so many people in one spot all at once: past and present. I'm usually so careful, but I admit I hadn't thought it all through, how it might play out having them all here together. The consequences of it.



So. Olivia: I think I'm fine there. But I'll have to do something about Johnno, soon as I get back to the marquee. I can't have him running his mouth off to anyone and everyone. I underestimated him, perhaps. I thought it was safer to have him here than not, to keep him close. But Jules invited Piers without my knowing. Yes, actually, that's where it all went wrong. If she hadn't, Johnno would never have known about the TV thing and we could have carried on as normal. It would never have worked, him on the show, he must know that. He does, in fact: he put it so well himself. He's an absolute liability. With his pot-smoking and his drinking and his long fucking memory. He'd have had some sort of freak-out in front of a journalist and it would all have come out. If he can see that – what a disaster he would have been – then I don't really understand why is he so cut.

The day before: Hannah: The Plus-One

The day before, I had dismissed my lingering anxiety as nothing more than exhaustion, but now, as I sit there, a creeping unease takes hold, my pulse quickening as my eyes lock onto the shadowy figure outside. The flickering candlelight distorts its form, casting it in an eerie glow, and for a moment, it feels as though the figure is staring directly at me. My breath catches in my throat, and the fine hairs on my arms rise instinctively, as if my body recognizes a threat before my mind can fully comprehend it. This must be my imagination—perhaps a trick of the dim light—but the intensity of the moment grips me with a fear I cannot shake. I let out an involuntary gasp, causing Charlie to turn toward me, his expression one of mild curiosity rather than concern. He follows my gaze to the window, but by the time he looks, the figure has vanished, leaving only the shifting shadows cast by the wind against the glass.

“What is it?” Charlie asks, his voice tinged with impatience, as if he assumes I am overreacting.

“There was someone… outside,” I whisper, barely able to form the words as I continue scanning the darkness.

Charlie peers through the glass, but there is nothing now—only the distorted reflection of the room’s golden light against the pitch-black night. Others notice our exchange and follow his lead, glancing toward the window with fleeting curiosity before returning to their conversations. No one sees what I saw, and the realization leaves me feeling ridiculous, as though my fear is nothing more than a foolish misinterpretation of shadows and candlelight. Yet, despite my best efforts to dismiss it, the dread clings to me, an unsettling weight that settles deep in my chest, making it impossible to relax.

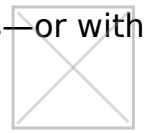
The evening, despite its carefully curated charm, feels increasingly artificial, as though beneath its polished surface lies something darker, something waiting to unravel. My

attempts to fit into this world, to move seamlessly among these people, feel forced, each interaction highlighting just how out of place I am. The brief conversation with Will, filled with awkward pauses and veiled indifference, reminds me of how invisible I have become in the eyes of men since becoming a mother. It is a strange realization, this slow fading from view, as if my existence has been quietly edited out of the narrative unfolding around me. The laughter that fills the space, the playful ribbing among old friends, the easy familiarity between those who have known each other for years—all of it feels like an elaborate stage play in which I have been cast in the wrong role. Charlie, who once saw me as his equal, now barely acknowledges my presence, his attention drawn elsewhere, his laughter too loud, too eager to belong.

The social fabric of this gathering is tightly woven, an intricate web of implicit rules and unspoken hierarchies that I have yet to decipher. I am an outsider, fumbling my way through a world where each step I take feels either like an effort toward belonging or a deeper plunge into isolation. The ominous presence at the window—real or imagined—feels like an extension of this unease, a physical manifestation of my growing sense of vulnerability. The thought that I could have imagined it should bring comfort, but instead, it unsettles me further. If my mind is playing tricks on me, what else have I been misinterpreting? The celebration around me, the lighthearted banter, the flowing champagne—are they merely distractions, illusions meant to disguise something far less benign?

The thought lingers, gnawing at the edges of my consciousness, turning the warmth of the marquee into something suffocating. This place, this event, feels less like a gathering of friends and more like a beautifully adorned cage, one where expectations and appearances hold more weight than sincerity. The laughter is too forced, the camaraderie too rehearsed, as if everyone is playing their part in a script written long before I arrived. And at the heart of it all, I find myself questioning not only my place among them but the very nature of the relationships that have bound this group together. Are we truly here to celebrate, or is there something else beneath the surface, something we are all pretending not to see?

The chapter unfolds as an exploration of social anxiety, of the unspoken rules that define belonging, and of the subtle but profound ways in which perception can distort reality. Through the protagonist’s eyes, we witness the struggle to navigate a world where appearances are everything and the fear of being an outsider is as tangible as the shifting shadows outside the window. The evening may be one of celebration, but the undercurrent of unease lingers, leaving us to wonder whether the real threat lies beyond the glass—or within the carefully guarded dynamics of the people inside.



Johnno: The Best Man

Perched atop the rugged battlements of the Folly, *the best man*, Johnno, and Will stand side by side, the howling wind carrying whispers of the past between them. Below, the restless sea crashes against the jagged rocks, an unrelenting force that mirrors the undercurrents of tension brewing beneath their camaraderie. From an outsider's perspective, they appear as two old friends enjoying a quiet drink before the wedding festivities truly begin, but beneath the surface, something unspoken lingers. Johnno, with his characteristic bravado, attempts to fill the silence with laughter, cracking jokes and reminiscing about the wild antics of their youth. Yet, despite the easy banter, Will remains guarded, his responses carefully measured, his polished exterior betraying none of the unease that flickers in his gaze. Their friendship, once effortless and unbreakable, now feels like a precarious balancing act—one misstep away from revealing the fractures beneath, testing the very bond between the groom and the best man.

The conversation takes a turn toward Jules's half-sister, Olivia, a topic that visibly unsettles Will. Johnno, ever the provocateur, makes a teasing remark about Olivia's striking beauty, but his words elicit an immediate and almost defensive response from Will. It is subtle, but telling—a brief moment where the mask of composure slips, replaced by something unguarded and raw. Will insists that Olivia is off-limits, that certain lines must never be crossed, a declaration that raises more questions than it answers. Johnno senses the weight behind his words, the careful restraint in his tone, as if Olivia's presence at the wedding stirs something Will would rather not confront. The exchange leaves Johnno with a lingering curiosity—what is it about Olivia that rattles Will, and why does he feel the need to shut down the conversation so quickly?

Their uneasy moment is soon interrupted by the arrival of Femi, Angus, Duncan, and Peter, their old schoolmates from Trevellyan's, whose laughter and easy camaraderie

inject a sense of familiarity into the night. Their presence brings a flood of nostalgia, memories of late-night escapades, drunken dares, and the reckless abandon of youth. The school they once attended had shaped them in ways they never fully acknowledged—Trevs, as they called it, had been more than just an institution; it had been a world of unspoken rules, hierarchies, and fierce loyalty. Now, as grown men standing on the precipice of adulthood's full weight, they fall into familiar patterns, reliving their glory days with the same boisterous energy. But beneath the revelry, there's an undeniable sense of something being held back, something left unsaid.

Their stories turn to old traditions, particularly the infamous "Survival" game—nights spent in the darkness of the school's vast grounds, testing their endurance, their wit, and sometimes, their cruelty. What had once felt like an initiation into brotherhood now carries a different weight, a recognition that not all their antics had been harmless fun. There's a moment where their laughter falters, where nostalgia shifts into something heavier, as if they are all silently recalling events they do not wish to discuss. Will, the golden boy of their group, maintains his carefully crafted image, effortlessly maneuvering the conversation to safer ground. Johnno, watching him closely, realizes how much effort Will exerts in controlling the narrative, ensuring that the past remains exactly where he wants it—buried beneath charm and well-placed distractions.

As the night wears on, the mood oscillates between revelry and reflection, between the comfort of old friendships and the discomfort of what they refuse to acknowledge. The passage of time has eroded none of their shared history, yet it has created undeniable distance, the realization that they are no longer the boys they once were. The wedding should be a moment of celebration, yet to Johnno, it feels like a reckoning—a moment where the past and present collide, forcing them to confront the truths they have spent years avoiding. The unspoken tension between him and Will, the guarded nature of their interactions, the hints of something unresolved—Johnno knows that this weekend will bring more than just vows and champagne toasts.

As the others continue drinking, Johnno takes a quiet moment to observe Will, noting the slight stiffness in his posture, the way his gaze flickers toward the shadows beyond the Folly, as if expecting something—or someone—to emerge. It is in that moment that Johnno realizes this wedding is not just a celebration for Will. It is an attempt at control, at erasing whatever it is that haunts him. But the past has a way of resurfacing, and Johnno suspects that before the weekend is over, whatever Will is trying to bury will claw its way back into the light.



Jules: The Bride

The Bride and Charlie find themselves standing alone on the battlements, temporarily removed from the wedding's extravagant celebrations, caught in a moment of nostalgia and unresolved emotions. The night air is cool, thick with the weight of things left unsaid, their conversation a delicate balance between familiarity and the unspoken tension of past indiscretions. The Bride, Jules, soon to be wed, explains the official reasoning behind choosing this remote island location—privacy from the press, a connection to her Irish heritage, and the exclusivity of hosting an event in such an untouched setting. Yet, beneath the polished explanations, a deeper truth lingers—one rooted in fleeting doubts, hidden regrets, and an unspoken awareness of paths not taken. As they talk, Charlie's presence stirs in The Bride a flicker of uncertainty, a whisper of what might have been had things unfolded differently. The setting, isolated and surrounded by the endless sea, amplifies the emotional gravity of their exchange, leaving them both teetering between nostalgia and reality.

What begins as a reflective conversation soon escalates into a subtle clash, as Jules, perhaps defensively, turns the focus onto Charlie's happiness in his own relationship. There is teasing, but beneath it lies a challenge—a provocation aimed at exposing whether Charlie harbors jealousy, whether he ever wanted something more with her. The dance of their words becomes a test of unspoken boundaries, revealing the complex and layered nature of their friendship. Jules finds herself searching his expressions for answers she isn't sure she wants, while Charlie's reluctance to fully engage hints at his own hesitations. The past and present seem to collide in this suspended moment, a reminder of how entangled their histories are. Yet, the night does not allow for resolutions—only more questions and the lingering feeling of unfinished business between them.

Later, Jules returns to Will, seeking solace in the familiarity of his touch, hoping intimacy will silence the emotions stirred by her exchange with Charlie. But her attempt to lose herself in the physical moment is interrupted by a grotesque and unexpected discovery—something damp and tangled in their bed. At first, she recoils in horror, her mind racing to decipher what kind of creature has been placed there. A closer look reveals that it is seaweed, arranged deliberately in a manner reminiscent of a schoolboy prank. The absurdity of it cuts through the tension, but not in a way that brings relief. Instead, the act feels pointed, laced with malice, dragging Will's past into their present in a way that feels both unsettling and cruel.

Jules struggles with a surge of anger, her thoughts spiraling between indignation and disillusionment. The act of placing seaweed in their bed feels like more than just a juvenile joke—it is a reminder of Will's past, of the private school traditions and the unspoken rules of his old friendships. She contemplates retaliation, her mind racing with ways to respond, to regain control of the situation. Yet, Will, ever the charmer, convinces her to let it go, to dismiss it as meaningless mischief rather than allowing it to cast a shadow over their wedding day. His words are soothing, but they do little to erase the unease now lodged in Jules's mind. The incident, however trivial on the surface, serves as a symbolic prelude to the wedding, highlighting the tension between moving forward and the ghosts that refuse to be left behind.

As the night stretches on, Jules cannot shake the feeling that something is lurking beneath the surface, something beyond childish pranks and whispered conversations. The isolation of the island, the omnipresent sea, and the weight of history seem to press in on her, making her question how much of the past ever truly stays buried. The interplay of nostalgia, unresolved emotions, and the fragile promise of marital bliss all swirl together, creating an atmosphere thick with anticipation and doubt. This chapter masterfully sets the stage for the unfolding drama, exploring the lingering shadows that exist within relationships and the uneasy realization that the past has a way of making itself known, no matter how carefully it is tucked away.

Hannah: The Plus-One

Hannah moves through the dance tent, the air thick with heat and energy as the wedding guests lose themselves in the chaotic joy of the celebration. The live band fills the space with a lively rhythm, and the dance floor sways under the weight of feet stomping in mismatched unison. Everywhere she looks, she sees flushed faces, arms flung in exuberant gestures, bodies moving in a feverish attempt to capture the spirit of an Irish jig. The atmosphere is intoxicating, a blend of laughter, music, and the uninhibited abandon that comes with too many drinks and the promise of a long night ahead. Yet, despite the revelry, Hannah feels a growing dissonance within herself, as if she is separate from the celebration, unable to fully immerse herself in the joy that surrounds her. Her mind is restless, preoccupied with thoughts of Charlie, of Jules, of the uneasy feeling that has been gnawing at her since the evening began. She watches the party unfold, trying to shake the discomfort, but then her eyes land on something—or rather, someone—that makes her pause.

Will is dancing with Olivia, his grip on her firm, his movements light and playful, as if nothing in the world could possibly be wrong. His confidence is effortless, the kind that charms a room without even trying, but Olivia's body language tells a different story. She moves with hesitation, stiff and unresponsive, as though she is forcing herself to participate in a dance she does not want to be part of. The smile on her lips is unconvincing, stretched too thin, a silent plea rather than an expression of enjoyment. Hannah watches, suddenly alert, sensing that this moment is significant, though she cannot yet articulate why. A flicker of recognition sparks in her mind, a memory surfacing from a conversation she once had with Olivia. It had been about a party—an event at the V&A museum, hosted by Jules—something that had seemed like idle chatter at the time. But now, as she watches Olivia’s discomfort under Will’s touch, the recollection tightens around her like a warning.

Hannah’s thoughts begin to race, trying to connect the dots between Olivia’s unease, Will’s presence, and the lingering sense that something at this wedding is not as it seems. The music swells, the crowd moves like a living organism, and for a moment, it feels like the entire night is spinning around her, pulling her deeper into a realization she isn't ready to face. A fellow guest stumbles into her shoulder, muttering an apology before disappearing back into the sea of moving bodies, but Hannah barely registers the impact. Her heart pounds in her chest, not from the energy of the dance but from the urgency rising in her. There is something here—something hidden just beneath the surface of polite smiles and wedding-day bliss—that she cannot ignore. Her instincts scream at her to pay attention, to follow the thread that has begun unraveling in front of her eyes. Will's carefree attitude, Olivia's hesitation, the whispered warnings from earlier in the night—it all feels connected, and the weight of that realization settles deep in her bones.

The celebration continues around her, oblivious to the shift in Hannah’s demeanor, to the storm of thoughts building behind her composed expression. The tent feels smaller now, suffocating, the once-welcoming atmosphere taking on an almost oppressive quality. The laughter, the clinking of glasses, the joyful chaos—it all feels like a performance, a stage carefully constructed to mask the truth. Hannah glances at Olivia again, searching her face for answers, but all she finds is fear. A silent, contained fear that sends a chill down her spine. This night, which had started as a celebration of love and union, now feels like something else entirely—an unraveling, a slow, creeping revelation of something that was never meant to come to light. Hannah doesn’t know what she’s about to uncover, but she knows one thing for certain: this wedding is far from over, and neither are the secrets it holds.

Johnno: The Best Man

The Whispering Cave looms in the darkness, its damp, briny air wrapping around Johnno as he leads the group into its eerie depths. Laughter bounces off the jagged rock walls, masking the tension that thickens with each step. The Best Man, Will, bound and blindfolded, stumbles slightly as he is led forward, grinning despite his discomfort. To him, this is just another wild stunt, another reckless prank in the long line of juvenile traditions that had always been part of their friendship. But Johnno’s grip on his arm is just a little too firm, his steps a little too deliberate, his silence stretching just a little too long. This isn’t just about tradition, not for Johnno—this is something deeper, something darker, something he has been waiting for far too long to say. The others, half-drunk and giddy with adrenaline, cheer him on, oblivious to the undercurrent of resentment rippling beneath his every move.

As they reach the heart of the cave, the stench of rotting seaweed and damp stone fills the air, mingling with the salty tang of the approaching tide. The ground beneath their feet is slick with moisture, and the sound of waves crashing against distant rocks grows louder, more insistent. Johnno watches Will’s face as the laughter around them starts to fade, as the realization creeps in that this is more than just a game. The blindfold robs Will of the confidence he usually wears like armor, and for the first time, Johnno sees him without the veil of effortless charm that had always kept him one step ahead. The group, now quiet with the weight of the moment, watches as Johnno tightens his grip on Will’s shoulders. Will shifts uncomfortably, a nervous chuckle escaping his lips. "Alright, Johnno," he says, trying to keep the amusement in his voice. "Joke’s over, yeah?"

But it isn’t over. Not yet.

Johnno has carried the weight of this moment for years, a heavy stone pressing against his ribs, waiting for the right time to break free. He has spent too many nights

replaying the past, tracing every betrayal, every humiliation, every time Will had used him, manipulated him, left him behind. This night, this cave, is his stage now. The memory of their school days floods his mind, the night they thought they were invincible, the night they took things too far. He can still see the face of the boy they called "Loner," can still hear the pleading in his voice as they tied him to the railing, laughing, so sure that the tide wouldn’t reach him. But it had. And in the morning, he was gone. They had promised never to speak of it again, and Will—self-assured, golden, untouchable Will—had moved on as though it had never happened. But Johnno never had. He never could.

Will’s shoulders stiffen as Johnno’s voice finally breaks the silence. He lays it all out, every grievance, every wound that had never quite healed. The stolen business opportunity, the broken promises, the betrayal that went beyond schoolyard cruelty and into something far worse. Will tries to brush it off at first, tries to play it cool, but there’s a crack in his voice that Johnno catches. He’s afraid. Not of the cave, not of the dark, but of what Johnno knows, of what he might finally do. "You think you’re the victim?" Johnno spits, his hands curling into fists. "You always do, don’t you? You think you can just walk away from everything, like none of it ever mattered."

The tide creeps closer, licking at Will’s shoes, and for the first time, he pulls at his restraints, testing them. Johnno takes a step back, watching him struggle, watching the confidence drain from his face. For a split second, he considers pushing this further, making Will feel even a fraction of the fear they had once inflicted on someone else. But something stops him—a flicker of exhaustion, of realization. He isn’t Will. He isn’t like him.

With a sharp breath, Johnno turns and walks away, leaving Will in the cold embrace of the cave, the whispers of the tide growing louder around him. He doesn’t look back. He doesn’t need to. The past will always be there, but tonight, for the first time in years, he isn’t the one drowning in it.

Now: The wedding night

On the wedding night, the atmosphere takes a chilling turn as the ushers, including Femi and Angus, stumble upon a twisted gold crown embedded in the damp, storm-ravaged earth. At first, it appears like a discarded remnant of the celebration, but upon closer inspection, they realize it belongs to Jules. The sight of the once-pristine crown, now severely bent and misshapen, sends an unsettling wave of unease through the group. The damage suggests a significant amount of force was applied, raising immediate concerns about what could have happened. Angus, visibly troubled, recalls the last time he saw Jules—right before the cake-cutting ceremony. He remembers catching a glimpse of her expression, one that seemed tense, bordering on either anger or fear, a detail that now feels far more significant in light of this ominous discovery.

As the group stands in silence, processing the implications of the damaged crown, the air around them feels heavy with something unspoken. Femi, attempting to piece together the events, asks if anyone had seen Jules after the power briefly flickered during the reception. An eerie pause follows as they exchange uncertain glances, each of them realizing that no one can confidently recall seeing her in the aftermath of the blackout. The realization settles over them like a weight, amplifying their collective unease. Angus, unwilling to voice his worst fears, shakes his head, his reluctance mirroring the group’s growing sense of dread. Duncan exhales sharply, the sound cutting through the tension, a nonverbal confirmation that he too feels the unsettling presence of something amiss.

Femi clarifies that he isn't outright suggesting Jules has been harmed, but his attempts to reconstruct the evening expose a gaping hole in their recollections. If Jules had left the reception willingly, someone should have seen her, yet no one did. The silence that follows his statement speaks louder than any words—the fact that not a single one of

them can confirm where she went is deeply unsettling. The storm, which had once seemed like nothing more than an inconvenience, now feels like a shroud concealing something far more sinister. The battered crown in Angus’s grasp serves as a tangible clue, but it only raises more questions than answers. The fact that it was found in the mud, away from the main wedding area, implies something happened—something that shouldn’t have.



As they reluctantly push forward, the night air grows colder, and the remnants of the storm leave behind an eerie stillness that feels almost unnatural. Each step through the wet grass and shifting earth feels heavier, as if the land itself is reluctant to give up its secrets. The Folly looms in the distance, its windows reflecting the occasional flicker of light, but instead of appearing welcoming, it now seems like a dark, watchful entity. Every gust of wind, every distant rustle in the underbrush, sets their nerves further on edge, as if something unseen is lurking just beyond their sight. The group, once merely concerned, now moves with a sense of urgency, their unease growing into a palpable fear that Jules may not just be missing—she may be in real danger.

Despite their shared apprehension, they know they cannot stop now. The longer Jules remains unaccounted for, the more their worries take root, threatening to spiral into full-blown panic. Every passing second deepens the mystery, and though none of them want to say it aloud, the thought lingers between them: what if they are already too late? The contrast between the joyous celebration that had taken place just hours ago and the foreboding atmosphere that now grips them is staggering. What was meant to be a night of unity and happiness has instead unraveled into a night of fear, unanswered questions, and an overwhelming sense that something terrible has happened. The darkness surrounding them is no longer just a product of the night—it is a veil hiding the truth, and they can only hope that whatever they are about to uncover is something they can still fix before it's too late.

Jules: The Bride

In *The Bride*, Jules unexpectedly finds herself thrust into the heart of an emotionally charged confrontation, one that unravels the delicate fabric of trust she had woven with her husband, Will. As she watches from the shadows, she overhears a confrontation between Will and Olivia, the latter making a desperate attempt to expose the secret relationship they have been hiding. Initially, Jules is in denial, unable to fully comprehend the magnitude of the moment. The fragments of their heated conversation, carried faintly by the wind, gradually begin to piece together the truth of the affair, a truth that had been lingering in the background but now comes to the forefront with undeniable clarity. The physical closeness between Will and Olivia, once brushed off as casual interactions, now takes on a far more sinister meaning, one that forces Jules to confront the painful reality that her husband, the man she married, has been living a double life.

As the conversation continues, Jules's heart races, a whirlwind of emotions taking over her. Disbelief first consumes her, as she cannot fathom the depth of Will's betrayal. How could the man she trusted, the man she thought she knew, be capable of such deception? The anguish soon shifts into a fierce anger, one that burns through her like a wildfire. This betrayal, once a distant suspicion, is now exposed in full force, and Jules cannot escape the emotional weight of the situation. The anger is not just aimed at Will for his infidelity, but at herself as well—for having missed the signs, for being blind to the lies that had been carefully constructed around her. It is a bitter awakening, one that forces Jules to question the very foundation of her marriage, her relationship, and the trust she had placed in Will for so long.

In the silence that follows the revelation, Jules stands frozen, processing the enormity of what she has just discovered. It feels as if the ground beneath her is shifting, the world spinning out of control, and she is left struggling to regain her footing. The

intense emotions coursing through her—disbelief, anger, humiliation—are now overshadowed by a deep sense of loss. Will's actions have not just betrayed her trust; they have betrayed the love and commitment she had believed they shared. Her whole world is upended, and the realization that she can no longer ignore the truth is a harsh pill to swallow. This emotional rupture marks the end of an era in her life, a point of no return that sends her spiraling into a journey of self-exploration and emotional reckoning.

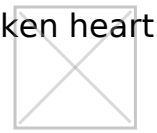


The cliffside setting where this confrontation takes place becomes a powerful metaphor for the emotional precipice Jules now faces. The cliff's edge, high and sharp, mirrors the sudden and jarring shift in Jules's perception of her life, her marriage, and her identity. She feels as if she is standing at the edge of a great chasm, with no clear way to move forward. Will's infidelity has pulled the rug out from under her, and she is left to face the fallout alone. The landscape around her, once familiar and comforting, now feels alien, much like the man she thought she knew. The weight of her emotions presses down on her, and she knows that the person she was moments before—the woman who stood by Will's side in love and trust—is gone, replaced by someone who must now navigate the harsh truth of betrayal.

This chapter is not merely a revelation of Will's infidelity; it is an exploration of Jules's inner transformation. The pain and anger she feels are not just directed outwardly at Will but are also focused inwardly on herself. She must now come to terms with who she has become in light of this betrayal—who she was when she believed in her marriage and who she must become now that everything she held dear has been shattered. Jules's emotional journey is complex, filled with raw vulnerability, self-doubt, and a thirst for justice. This moment, while harrowing, also serves as a catalyst for her personal growth, as she is forced to reassess her values, her future, and the strength she never realized she had.

As the wedding continues, a painful juxtaposition unfolds before Jules—around her, life carries on as if nothing has changed. Guests continue to enjoy the celebration, unaware of the turmoil raging inside her. The contrast between the public joy and her

private grief amplifies the sense of isolation Jules feels. She is surrounded by people, yet she is profoundly alone, caught in a whirlwind of emotions that threaten to overwhelm her. This chapter captures not just the agony of betrayal, but the quiet devastation of realizing that the person she loved and trusted is no longer the person she thought he was. The revelation of Will’s secret life has irrevocably altered the course of her future, leaving her with the daunting task of rebuilding herself from the pieces of her broken heart.



Now: The wedding night

On the wedding night, with the wind howling around them, Duncan, Femi, and Angus find themselves outside, torches in hand, searching the darkness for something unknown but undeniably unsettling. The mention of a body by a waitress has set the stage for their uneasy mission, turning the already grim atmosphere into a breeding ground for suspicion and fear. Every strange noise and irregularity in the terrain now feels like a potential discovery, heightening their anxiety as they move through the night. Duncan attempts to lighten the mood by joking about their school days and a game they used to play called "Survival," hoping to ease the tension, but his attempts fall flat. Femi and Angus, clearly not in the mood for nostalgia, are frustrated by his levity, given the seriousness of what they believe they are about to encounter.

The conversation quickly takes a darker turn as the three friends delve into their shared past, with unresolved grievances surfacing about a particular school activity that ended tragically. Duncan defends the school tradition, brushing off the death as an accident, while Angus vehemently condemns it as reckless and dangerous, suggesting that Duncan’s penchant for intimidation played a role in the incident. The tension between them becomes palpable, the long-suppressed animosities rising to the surface as they confront their past actions. Their differing views highlight the deep divide in their friendship, with Duncan’s dismissive attitude and Angus’s serious condemnation pulling them further apart. As the wind intensifies, their uneasy banter grows more charged, mirroring the darkening environment around them.

Despite their growing isolation, they push forward, trying to focus on the task at hand. The cold, relentless wind and the eerie, unsettling silence of the night only add to the strangeness of their situation, creating an atmosphere that feels almost surreal. The juxtaposition of this nightmarish search with the previous day’s joyful wedding celebrations is not lost on them. The stark contrast between the warmth of the

ceremony and the chilling, uncertain atmosphere they now find themselves in emphasizes the absurdity of their predicament. The search for something as vague as "a body" feels absurd in this context, underscoring the strange shift from celebration to grim reality.

Duncan, ever the skeptic, dismisses the alarms they've heard as nothing more than drunken exaggerations from the wedding party, a result of the revelry and chaos that surrounded them earlier. But Femi, sensing there may be more to the situation, suggests that the celebratory atmosphere might have inadvertently led to an unfortunate incident, one that they now have to face. Duncan, however, focuses on Charlie, a particular guest from the wedding, suggesting that his intoxicated state might be a lead worth pursuing. This theory, while speculative, adds a layer of intrigue to the mystery they are trying to unravel, shifting their focus to one of the wedding's attendees rather than the vague notion of a body.

The chapter encapsulates a poignant moment where youthful recklessness meets the harsh realities of adulthood. The men, once bound by the carefree bonds of their youth, are now forced to confront the consequences of their actions, past and present. What began as a fun, light-hearted game now feels like a haunting reminder of the darker aspects of their shared history. In the midst of a wedding celebration, a potential tragedy unfolds, pulling them into a situation that forces them to confront not only their fears but the weight of their past decisions. The atmosphere is charged with tension, the wind echoing the turmoil within them as they are thrust into a nightmarish reality that will test the limits of their friendship and their ability to reconcile their past with the present.

Hannah: The Plus-One

In the chapter *The Plus-One*, the protagonist, Hannah, is confronted with a deep internal struggle that leaves her emotions torn between attraction and rage. Her growing feelings for Will are clouded by the unsettling realization that he may be tied to a tragic event involving her sister, Alice. As Hannah reflects on the events that have led her to this painful conclusion, she recalls a conversation with Jethro and Luis, which planted the seed of suspicion about Will's involvement in Alice's untimely death. Despite her attempts to dismiss these thoughts as mere coincidence, the facts begin to align too perfectly, forcing her to face the painful truth that Will may have played a role in the destruction of Alice's life.

The dark past resurfaces as Hannah recalls the anonymous video that was circulated about Alice, a video that deeply damaged her sister's reputation. At the time, the grief of losing Alice overwhelmed her family, preventing them from investigating the true source of the video or identifying who was responsible for the public humiliation. In her own private world, Hannah swears vengeance, yet she finds herself grappling with the irony that the same man she is drawn to—Will—is the one she believes may have contributed to Alice's tragic end. The attraction she feels towards Will, once seen as harmless or even flattering, now feels like a betrayal to her sister, adding to the turmoil brewing inside her.

As the wedding progresses, Hannah's suspicions are only solidified by her observations of Will. At the wedding, she watches his every move, noticing the way he interacts with others and, most disturbingly, how his charm seems to eerily mirror the way he once engaged with Alice. His interactions with her also take on a strange familiarity, as if he has mistaken her for her late sister. This unsettling realization sparks a stronger sense of fury and helplessness within her, especially as she sees him continuing to flourish despite the shadow of his past actions.

The wedding setting becomes a poignant contrast to Hannah’s inner turmoil. Surrounded by guests who remain blissfully unaware of the weight of her emotions, she moves through the marquee, which intermittently grows dark, a fitting metaphor for her state of mind. With each passing moment, her desire for revenge deepens, and the festivity around her feels more like a reminder of Alice's lost potential rather than a celebration. The juxtaposition between Will's apparent success and the tragic end of her sister creates a bitter sense of injustice that Hannah cannot ignore.



The cutting of the wedding cake is a symbolic moment that becomes the climax of Hannah's emotional turmoil. Watching Will and his bride, Jules, perform this ritual of union and celebration, Hannah’s anger reaches its peak. When Jules smashes cake into Will's face as part of the ceremony, Hannah is struck by the seemingly innocent act, but to her, it holds a violent undertone. The moment mirrors her inner conflict, the growing rage she feels toward Will, and her desire to lash out, to somehow make him feel the weight of the wrongs that have been done to Alice.

Hannah’s narrative is a powerful portrayal of grief, betrayal, and the search for justice. Her emotions are complex, caught between the aching loss of her sister and the growing realization that she might be falling for a man who could have played a part in her death. As she watches the wedding unfold, the external joy contrasts sharply with her internal chaos, highlighting the difficulty of reconciling the public celebration with the private grief and anger that consume her. Through Hannah’s eyes, the reader is drawn into a world where revenge and justice feel intertwined, and where the past’s unresolved pain threatens to overshadow any hope of moving forward.

Now: The wedding night

The wedding night, once a dazzling celebration of unity and joy, is suddenly plunged into an unsettling darkness as a power outage sweeps through the marquee. The revelers, caught mid-conversation and mid-dance, fall silent as the storm outside intensifies, rattling the very fabric of the tent. Rain lashes against the structure, the wind’s howling crescendos drowning out the initial gasps of surprise. The dim glow of flickering candles barely illuminates the disoriented guests, casting eerie shadows that flicker across their faces, amplifying the growing tension. The laughter and music that had once filled the space are now replaced with hushed murmurs and uneasy shuffling, as though the very essence of the wedding night has been snuffed out along with the lights. For a brief moment, the blackout feels like an uninvited guest, bringing with it a sense of dread that no one dares voice aloud.

As the guests shift uncomfortably, the storm outside pounds against the island with relentless force, hammering the marquee with gusts of wind strong enough to make the structure tremble. The island’s isolation, once a charming element of the wedding’s exclusivity, now feels like a trap, locking them in place with no means of escape until the tempest passes. Conversations, whispered and uncertain, swirl among the attendees, speculating whether this is simply a minor inconvenience or the prelude to something far more sinister. Some joke nervously, their laughter brittle, but others are gripped by a growing unease that has little to do with the weather. The wedding planner, Aoife, moves swiftly through the crowd, attempting to reassure jittery guests while simultaneously scanning the area for any sign of disruption beyond the storm. The staff work hurriedly to retrieve flashlights and lanterns, their hurried movements reflecting an unspoken concern that something is not quite right.

When the power finally flickers back to life, the marquee is bathed once more in warm, golden light, yet the moment of relief is fleeting. The scene before them, once the

epitome of elegance and festivity, now appears slightly off-kilter, as though the outage has exposed an undercurrent of disorder that had been lurking just beneath the surface. Tables are in disarray, abandoned glasses and overturned wine bottles litter the floor, their contents pooling into dark stains on the pristine white tablecloths. A pair of silver sandals lies forgotten beneath a chair, and the once-glorious wedding cake now bears the first marks of a premature slicing, its deep red sponge stark against the surrounding mess. The damage is subtle, but unmistakable—something had shifted in the darkness, and the return of the lights has done little to restore the evening's once-carefree atmosphere.

Despite efforts to reignite the revelry, the tension lingers, an unshakable presence weaving its way through the crowd like an invisible specter. The Irish band, after a moment's hesitation, resumes playing, though their once-lively music now feels like a forced attempt to restore normalcy. Guests warily step around broken glass, their movements measured, their voices lower than before. The storm outside continues to rage, reinforcing the stark reality that no one can leave the island until the weather calms. Some make light of the situation, raising their glasses in mock toasts to the unpredictable forces of nature, but the forced nature of their humor only highlights the unease that refuses to dissipate.

Then, just as the collective tension seems to settle into an uneasy acceptance, a sound pierces through the din of the storm—sharp, distinct, and chillingly unfamiliar. At first, it is dismissed as the wind, another burst of violent rain against the marquee, or the distant crash of waves against the cliffs. But then it comes again, clearer this time—a sound that does not belong to the storm. The guests freeze, their conversations cut short, as a collective shiver seems to run through the crowd. Eyes dart toward the entrance of the marquee, toward the shadowy edges of the reception area where candlelight fails to reach. The moment stretches unbearably, the once-opulent wedding now feeling like the prologue to something far darker.

The guests glance at one another, searching for answers, but none are offered. The wedding planner, ever the professional, attempts to calm the murmuring crowd, but

even she cannot conceal the flicker of uncertainty in her expression. Something has shifted in the atmosphere, an unspoken knowledge that the night’s troubles are far from over. As the storm howls outside, rattling the tent like a beast demanding entry, the celebration that had once been the pinnacle of joy now teeters on the edge of something far more ominous. The chapter closes with an overwhelming sense of anticipation, leaving both the characters and the reader with an unsettling question: what exactly has disrupted the night, and is the worst still yet to come?



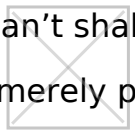
Hannah: The Plus-One

During the wedding ceremony, *The Plus-One* feels a distinct sense of separation from the event as she sits among distant relatives, quietly observing from the sidelines. Her attention is split between the unfolding ceremony and the occasional glance at Charlie, her partner, who is deeply immersed in the celebration, interacting with friends and family in ways that make Hannah feel more like an outsider. As the bride, Jules, walks down the aisle, Hannah is struck by a fleeting moment of fear in her expression—a brief look of uncertainty that quickly fades into a bright, assured smile as she reaches her groom, Will. This fleeting moment of vulnerability is not lost on Hannah, who begins to reflect on her own feelings of unease and the complex emotions that come with such an important event.

The ceremony progresses smoothly, set against a stunning backdrop that Hannah can’t help but admire. The lavishness of the venue, from the grandiose flowers to the elegant décor, contrasts sharply with her own wedding experiences, subtly highlighting the financial disparities between her life and the luxurious celebration taking place before her. As the ceremony wraps up and the guests are ushered outside, they eagerly toss rose petals into the air, only for the wind to scatter them hurriedly across the lawn. This fleeting, almost chaotic moment sparks a deeper reflection in Hannah about the superstitions surrounding weddings and the ominous atmosphere that seems to linger, amplified by the local lore shared by the bartenders about the venue being haunted. The eerie stories only add to Hannah’s growing sense of discomfort, as she contemplates the unpredictable nature of both the day’s events and her own internal anxieties.

As she explores the venue further, Hannah’s sense of being out of place intensifies. She observes the elaborate setup—each detail meticulously arranged, from the fine china to the sparkling glasses—and feels a profound disconnect from the atmosphere

of wealth and exclusivity. The guests, dressed in stylish and sophisticated outfits, engage in conversations about topics she feels disconnected from, from business ventures to luxury vacations, all of which serve as reminders of her outsider status. When she engages in brief conversations with the other guests, they are polite but superficial, often focusing on wedding hashtags and the social status of the attendees, which only emphasizes her growing sense of alienation. Despite her efforts to participate, she can't shake the feeling that she doesn't belong among these people, as though she is merely playing a role rather than being part of the true celebration.



As the evening progresses, Hannah's discomfort continues to build, and she finds herself retreating into herself. She struggles to find a comfortable space within the wedding's social dynamic, unable to escape the growing tension and awkwardness that seem to follow her every interaction. From the groom's school friends, who make her feel as though she's invisible, to an uncomfortable exchange with Will's parents, every moment seems to reinforce her feelings of being an outsider. This culminates in an unfortunate moment when Charlie, who has been drinking and is slightly tipsy, inadvertently embarrasses her with an offhand comment about her choice of headwear. His thoughtlessness stings, not just because of the comment itself, but because it highlights the distance she feels from him in this environment. It underscores a deeper issue in their relationship—a lack of connection that she had hoped wouldn't be so evident.

Despite her attempts to navigate the social complexities of the wedding with grace, Hannah finds herself struggling with an overwhelming sense of not truly belonging. The anxiety she feels about fitting in is compounded by a more profound realization that she may never feel at home in these circles. Her final exchange with Charlie only intensifies these feelings, leaving her with lingering doubts about her place in both the wedding and in their relationship. As she retreats further into herself, the once joyous occasion becomes a reflective moment, where she questions the authenticity of her connection with both Charlie and the world she is surrounded by. This experience forces her to confront the dissonance between her outward appearance—trying to fit in—and the internal conflict that makes her feel increasingly alienated. The wedding,

which should have been a celebration of love and unity, instead becomes a catalyst for Hannah’s realization that perhaps she is more disconnected from her own life than she ever imagined.



Aoife: The Wedding Planner

The weight of responsibility bears heavily on Aoife, the wedding planner, as she reflects on the unsettling incident that has overshadowed what should have been a joyous occasion. From the moment she noticed the bridesmaid’s unusual demeanor in the morning, a nagging sense of concern lingered at the back of her mind. Yet, with a multitude of tasks demanding her attention, from coordinating vendors to managing last-minute requests from the wedding party, she found herself unable to act on her instincts. The moment of realization came too late—by then, the bridesmaid had already fallen into the water, an event that sent shockwaves through the reception. The collective gasp from the guests, the splash that shattered the celebratory atmosphere, and the chaotic scramble that followed replayed in Aoife’s mind like a nightmare she wished she could rewrite. She had encountered all sorts of challenges in her career, from missing rings to floral disasters, but nothing had prepared her for this—the sharp, breathless terror of witnessing a guest in distress, slipping beneath the surface.

The groom's quick reaction to dive in and rescue the bridesmaid momentarily alleviated the tension, redirecting the guests' attention away from the accident. However, for Aoife, the incident became a catalyst for self-recrimination, forcing her to question whether she had failed in her duty to anticipate and prevent such an occurrence. She couldn't shake the eerie familiarity of the moment, the cold grip of past memories surfacing—memories of another day when water had swallowed someone whole, leaving only regret in its wake. The echoes of her past intertwined with the present, each heartbeat a reminder of how fragile control truly was. But unlike before, this time, there had been a rescue. There had been a second chance. Yet, the thought haunted her—what if there hadn’t been? What if, for all her experience, she had allowed something truly irreversible to unfold on her watch?

Even as she maintained an outward appearance of grace, expertly directing the shaken guests toward the marquee for the wedding breakfast, an internal storm raged within her. The laughter, the clinking of glasses, and the soft hum of background music all felt like a thin veil disguising the emotional undercurrents threatening to pull her under. In her role, she was expected to be invisible yet omnipresent, ensuring perfection while remaining behind the scenes. But tonight, she couldn't escape the weight of what had almost happened. If only she had paid closer attention. If only she had trusted her instincts. These thoughts swirled in her mind, an unrelenting tide of what-ifs, as she prepared to finish what she had started—delivering a flawless evening, no matter the personal cost.

As the guests settled back into the rhythm of the evening, Aoife's practiced smile remained firmly in place, masking the exhaustion that crept into her bones. She had long ago accepted that perfection in her line of work was an illusion, but moments like these reminded her just how much of her own emotions she had to suppress. The night would go on, and so would she, her regrets neatly tucked away beneath layers of professionalism. Yet deep down, she knew that the echoes of this night—like those from the past—would never truly leave her. The weight of her responsibilities extended far beyond ensuring the correct placement of centerpieces or orchestrating a seamless schedule. It was about people—their lives, their safety, their moments of joy and vulnerability. And for all her expertise, there were moments when even she felt powerless against the unpredictable tides of fate.

As the night progressed, Aoife found herself standing at the edge of the venue, staring out at the darkened water, its surface now calm and undisturbed. A gust of wind sent a ripple across it, making her shudder involuntarily. She inhaled deeply, exhaling slowly in an attempt to steady herself. The weight of her past and present responsibilities intertwined in a way that made her stomach churn. This job had always been more than just managing logistics—it was about navigating the unpredictable nature of human emotions, relationships, and sometimes, tragedy. And as much as she tried to separate herself from the evening's near disaster, she knew it would linger with her long after the last guest had departed.

Olivia: The Bridesmaid

The chapter "*OLIVIA: The Bridesmaid*" plunges readers into an emotionally charged wedding reception, where Olivia, overshadowed by the grandeur of her half-sister Jules' wedding, grapples with an inner turmoil she cannot escape. The opulence of the event only amplifies her discomfort, making her feel like an outsider despite being a bridesmaid. Dressed in a gown from the previous night, Olivia blends into the crowd physically but remains disconnected emotionally, haunted by tensions that simmer beneath the surface of her interactions with Jules. The chill she feels is more than just the cool night air—it mirrors the unspoken words, the buried conflicts, and the quiet resentment that have long defined their strained relationship.

As the festivities continue, Will, the groom and Jules' charming new husband, takes center stage with a captivating speech that enthralls the guests. He speaks of fate and serendipity, recounting how an impulsive decision at a party for *The Download* at the V&A Museum led him to meet Jules. His storytelling paints their romance as an extraordinary stroke of luck, a narrative designed to enthrall and endear him to his audience. The guests, charmed by his charisma, listen intently, absorbing his words as if they were straight out of a fairy tale. But to Olivia, the speech is laced with an unsettling undertone—one that serves as a bitter reminder of the tangled web of secrets connecting them. While everyone else basks in the romance of Will's words, Olivia sees past the illusion, recognizing the calculated precision behind his every sentence. His ability to manipulate emotions with ease, to craft a story so convincing that even Jules seems oblivious to its flaws, unsettles her to the core.

Olivia's personal history with Will—once known to her as Steven—is a ghost that refuses to fade. Their first encounter, shrouded in secrecy and deception, has left an indelible mark on her, transforming what should have been a moment of joy into a silent battleground of conflicting emotions. Seeing Will again after Jules announced

their engagement had been like a punch to the gut—shock, nausea, disbelief all rolled into one suffocating moment. Now, watching him effortlessly weave a narrative that excludes the uncomfortable truths of their past, Olivia feels trapped in a cruel irony. The weight of the knowledge she carries—the truth of who Will really is—presses down on her, yet she remains paralyzed by indecision. Should she say something? Should she disrupt this perfect image that Jules has crafted for herself, shattering the illusion of happiness before it has a chance to take root?

The chapter expertly explores the facades people wear in the name of family obligations and societal expectations, a theme Olivia is all too familiar with. She is not just contending with Jules' dominance but also with her own struggle for authenticity in an environment where appearances matter more than reality. The mention of a dating app and Olivia's use of an alias allude to her efforts to escape her own identity, to carve out a version of herself untainted by past mistakes. The deeper she sinks into this performance, the harder it becomes to determine where the lies end and the truth begins. Every glance, every exchange, every forced smile at the reception is a reminder of the precarious balancing act she has been maintaining.

Jules, ever the orchestrator, thrives in her role as the bride, reveling in the attention and controlling every detail of the evening with precision. She dictates the social landscape around her, introducing people with an air of authority, ensuring that everyone plays their part in her meticulously planned day. Olivia is all too aware of her sister's talent for manipulation—how effortlessly Jules can spin a situation in her favor, bending others to her will. This awareness makes Olivia's predicament all the more agonizing. If she were to speak the truth about Will, would anyone even believe her? Or would she be painted as the jealous, troublesome sister trying to sabotage Jules' big day?

The emotional crescendo of the chapter builds as Olivia weighs her options—truth or silence, confrontation or complicity. The wedding, meant to symbolize love and new beginnings, instead becomes a setting for hidden tensions, unspoken betrayals, and the burden of knowledge that Olivia alone must bear. The carefully constructed façade

of happiness begins to show its cracks, leaving readers to wonder: how long before the illusion shatters completely? Through Olivia’s eyes, the celebration takes on a darker tone—one where joy and deception walk hand in hand, and where every moment of laughter is underpinned by secrets waiting to be revealed.



Hannah: The Plus-One

The Plus-One dynamic is undeniable as Hannah feels an unexplainable pull towards Olivia, driven by an instinct she can’t ignore despite being advised to steer clear. The lively chatter and laughter from the marquee fade into the background as she ventures towards the secluded Folly, a place shrouded in solitude. There, she discovers Olivia, her once composed demeanor giving way to vulnerability, as she sits lost in thought, seemingly carrying a weight too heavy to bear. Without hesitation, Hannah approaches, offering a quiet, nonjudgmental presence, creating an unspoken invitation for Olivia to let her guard down.

At first, Olivia appears reluctant, her words measured and her emotions guarded, as though afraid to reveal too much. However, under the gentle warmth of Hannah’s concern, she begins to open up, revealing the immense pressure she feels amidst the wedding celebrations. Olivia confesses that the expectations of being perfect for everyone—family, friends, and society—have become suffocating, leaving her yearning for an escape. Her attempt to disappear isn’t about seeking attention but a desperate effort to find a moment of reprieve from the overwhelming demands placed upon her.

Sensing Olivia’s inner turmoil, Hannah decides to share her own story, speaking about her sister Alice, whose struggles once mirrored Olivia’s current predicament. She recounts Alice’s bright academic journey, which was abruptly overshadowed by a devastating breakup and the betrayal of having private photos shared without her consent. The emotional scars Alice endured, compounded by the humiliation of public scrutiny, serve as a testament to the resilience required to overcome such adversity. Hannah uses this story not to overshadow Olivia’s pain but to create a space of understanding, showing that while the weight of personal struggles feels isolating, it is possible to rise above them.

As the conversation deepens, themes of trust, societal pressure, and the violation of privacy take center stage. Olivia listens intently as Hannah explains how Alice eventually found solace by confiding in those who genuinely cared for her, emphasizing the importance of sharing burdens with someone trustworthy. Olivia begins to see a reflection of her own experiences in Alice's story, finding quiet comfort in knowing she isn't alone in her feelings of despair and helplessness. Hannah's gentle encouragement makes it clear that acknowledging one's pain and speaking about it is not a sign of weakness but a crucial step toward healing.

The interaction between Hannah and Olivia becomes a powerful exploration of the emotional and psychological toll of societal expectations. Hannah's willingness to be vulnerable creates an environment where Olivia feels safe to express her fears, offering a glimpse of hope amidst her struggles. Olivia's quiet nods and occasional glances toward Hannah suggest the beginning of a connection, built on shared pain and mutual empathy. In this space, words are less about solutions and more about validation—an acknowledgment that feeling overwhelmed does not diminish one's worth.

Hannah concludes their exchange with a heartfelt reminder: sometimes, the heaviest burdens can only be lightened by sharing them with someone outside one's immediate circle. Her words resonate deeply with Olivia, planting a seed of trust that may grow into a deeper bond. The interaction signifies a turning point for Olivia, where the act of confiding in someone begins to feel less daunting. Meanwhile, for Hannah, this moment reinforces the transformative power of kindness and understanding, highlighting the profound impact of simply being there for someone in need.

In this delicate yet profound exchange, the narrative delves into the complexities of mental health, the pressures of living up to others' expectations, and the quiet strength required to seek help. Olivia's subtle acknowledgment of Hannah's story suggests a tentative willingness to open up, marking a potential shift in her journey. By the end of their conversation, an unspoken promise of support and solidarity hangs in the air, leaving both women changed in subtle yet meaningful ways.

Jules: The Bride

The Bride, Jules, stands before the mirror in her pristine wedding gown, the embodiment of elegance and meticulous planning. The Folly, a fifteenth-century structure nestled on a secluded island, serves as the perfect backdrop for the grandeur and exclusivity she envisioned for this moment. As she admires her reflection, the weight of perfection settles upon her—every detail of the wedding has been curated to exude sophistication and control. Yet, despite the seamless execution of her plans, an unwelcome thought lingers, resurfacing the unsettling note that warned her against marrying Will. She tells herself it was a cruel joke or an act of jealousy, but the doubt, however small, refuses to be fully silenced. The moment is fleeting, however, as the Bride brushes aside the thought and steels herself for the day ahead, determined to uphold the flawless image she has crafted.

The narrative delves into Jules's relationship with Will, a whirlwind romance marked by intensity, desire, and a mutual understanding of ambition. Their connection, though rapid, feels undeniable—fueled by a shared need for success and the intoxicating pull of physical chemistry. Jules has never been one to second-guess herself, and her decision to marry Will is no exception; certainty, after all, has always been her strong suit. Yet, beneath this confidence lies an unspoken urgency, as if their relationship is a meticulously timed performance that must stay on script. Their interactions are a delicate balance of passion and precision, both of them acutely aware of the importance of perception. To Jules, Will represents not just a partner but a calculated choice—someone who matches her in poise, status, and the relentless pursuit of excellence.

Beyond her relationship, Jules reflects on the select few who make up her inner circle, a contrast to the vast network of professional acquaintances who admire her from a distance. Among these few is Charlie, her closest confidant and the person who knows

her best outside of Will. Their bond, forged over years, is one of familiarity and history, though the lines between past and present remain blurred in ways Jules chooses not to acknowledge. As she readies herself for the biggest day of her life, she recognizes the significance of keeping certain aspects of her past neatly tucked away, unwilling to allow sentimentality to interfere with her perfectly curated reality. But the presence of Olivia, her half-sister, serves as a reminder of the unpredictable elements she cannot control. Olivia's detachment from the wedding preparations unsettles Jules, though she chooses to interpret it as immaturity rather than something more complex.

The arrival of Will, breaking tradition with a spontaneous visit before the ceremony, introduces an unexpected ripple in Jules's otherwise structured morning. His presence is a mix of reassurance and disruption, a reminder of the passion they share but also of the impulsive nature that lies beneath his polished exterior. Just as she regains her composure, Johnno, Will's best man, makes an uninvited appearance, further testing Jules's ability to maintain her sense of order. There is an edge to Johnno, a lingering unpredictability that sets him apart from Will's polished charm, and Jules is acutely aware of the tension between them. Their exchange is brief yet charged, a reminder of histories unspoken and dynamics yet to be unraveled. While Will represents control, Johnno exudes something rawer, an element that Jules has no interest in entertaining on this day of calculated perfection.

As the chapter concludes, Jules stands on the precipice of a moment she has long envisioned, a wedding not just of love but of carefully crafted appearances and power. The air is thick with anticipation, yet beneath the surface, cracks begin to form—whispers of doubt, hidden tensions, and the ever-present need to maintain control. Through Jules's eyes, the wedding is not just a union of two people but a performance, one where perfection is paramount, and the slightest deviation could unravel everything she has built. The stage is set, the players are in place, and yet, there is an unmistakable sense that the story unfolding may not go according to script.

Aoife: The Wedding Planner

The scene surrounding me is a blur of constant motion, a cacophony of voices and concerns. Everywhere I turn, there are guests with requests, questions, and last-minute changes that need immediate attention. As The Wedding Planner, it’s my job to handle all of it with grace and composure—to soothe anxieties, to anticipate needs before they are voiced, and to ensure that the day, despite its inevitable chaos, moves forward with flawless elegance. Even as nature attempts to throw its own unpredictable obstacles in our path, it’s my responsibility to maintain a sense of calm and order amidst the storm.

The wind picks up, swirling through the open spaces, carrying with it the scent of the sea and earth, and threatening to unravel the delicate outdoor celebration we’ve worked so hard to craft. The silk dresses of the bridal party flutter with the breeze, and guests adjust their hats, some tumbling away in the gusts. There is something almost poetic in the disruption, as the lively, erratic forces of nature challenge the careful control we’ve put in place. But even within this potential chaos, there is a beauty—an unexpected kind of magic that adds depth to the day, making it all feel alive and in motion, a perfect reflection of the unpredictability that is woven into every event, no matter how meticulously planned.

Through it all, I remain the calm in the center of the whirlwind, focused on the task at hand and on keeping everything on track. My hands are a blur as they work to adjust seating arrangements, fix minor issues, and provide reassurance to those around me. My voice, steady and clear, guides guests and vendors alike, giving them a sense of direction and confidence amidst the confusion. As the wind grows stronger, and the demands of the day begin to pile up, the gentle melody of "Is tusa ceol mo chroí"—a Gaelic song filled with memories of childhood and home—floats in the background. For a brief moment, the tune pulls me out of the frenzy, grounding me in a place of

warmth and love. It’s a reminder of the reasons I do what I do, a reminder that this is more than just an event—it’s about love, connection, and creating something meaningful for the couple and their guests.

Despite the storm of questions and the urgency that drives the day, I maintain my focus, moving from one task to another with practiced efficiency. One moment I’m directing guests to the gluten-free options near the north garden, and the next, I’m helping with a seating change or directing the photographer to capture a particular moment. It’s all in a day’s work, a whirlwind of activities that requires not just organizational skills, but an intuitive understanding of the flow of events. As the weather continues to challenge us and the guests grow restless with the unpredictability, I remain steady, seamlessly guiding the day forward, ensuring that nothing falls through the cracks.

As I work through each request, I feel a sense of pride in my ability to control the chaos, to weave together every element of the day into something that will be remembered for years to come. It’s not just about logistics or planning—it’s about creating a space where people can celebrate, where love and joy take center stage despite the obstacles. I am not just a planner; I am the orchestrator of this day, pulling all the elements together into a harmonious celebration. Each adjustment, each decision made, is a part of a larger vision, one that culminates in a moment that is unforgettable for the couple and their loved ones.

In those moments when I pause to catch my breath, I realize that being a wedding planner is more than a job—it’s a deeply emotional experience. I am not simply executing a plan; I am creating memories, shaping the emotional tone of the day, and ensuring that every person in attendance feels the significance of the event. It’s a job that requires heart and soul, something beyond the practicalities of the day, a commitment to making each wedding feel personal and special. And as I stand there, amidst the whirlwind, I am reminded of the power of the work I do and the profound impact it has on the lives of those I work with.

Hannah: The Plus-One

Hannah grips the boat’s railing tightly, her knuckles white as she fights the rising nausea brought on by the relentless rocking of the waves. The journey to Inis an Amplóra is proving more treacherous than she had anticipated, the rough seas serving as an unsettling prelude to *The Plus-One* wedding they are about to attend. Charlie, seated beside her with a look of mild amusement, reassures her with empty platitudes, though his own unease is betrayed by the occasional tightening of his jaw. Their captain, Mattie, an older man well-versed in the island’s treacherous waters, steers with practiced ease, regaling them with stories of the land they are fast approaching. His tales, rich with history, paint a darker picture than the picturesque wedding venue they had imagined. Once a sanctuary for a persecuted religious sect, the island had been the site of an unspeakable massacre—an event buried beneath the weight of time and forgotten by all but those who made the journey across these waters.

Mattie's voice carries over the howling wind as he details the discovery of the remains, a grim reminder of the island’s violent past. Hannah listens intently, feeling an inexplicable chill creep up her spine, as if the very air on the boat has grown heavier. Jules had chosen this location for its exclusivity, its inaccessibility lending an air of grandeur to her already extravagant wedding plans. Yet, as Hannah watches the jagged cliffs loom in the distance, she cannot shake the feeling that beneath the island’s breathtaking beauty lies something deeply unsettling. Charlie, on the other hand, remains unbothered, dismissing Mattie’s stories as superstitious ramblings meant to entertain nervous travelers. He is more preoccupied with his thoughts on Jules’s fiancé, Will, whose sudden and whirlwind engagement he finds questionable at best.

As they approach the dock, the contrast between Hannah and Jules becomes ever more apparent. Where Jules thrives in a world of careful curation and refinement,

Hannah exists in a state of organized chaos, her life dictated by instinct rather than meticulous planning. The island, with its duality of isolation and grandeur, mirrors the complexities of their friendship—an uneasy balance between admiration and unspoken tension. Hannah can sense Charlie's skepticism about the wedding, a doubt she too shares but dares not voice. There is something about the rapid nature of Jules's engagement that feels off, and while Charlie's distrust stems from Will's carefully controlled persona, Hannah's discomfort is more visceral, a feeling she cannot yet articulate.



As the boat nears the island, the water calms slightly, momentarily easing Hannah's discomfort. A cormorant emerges from the mist, its dark wings slicing through the sky before disappearing into the cliffs, an image that inexplicably captures her attention. There is something poetic about the sight—a creature that thrives on the edge of land and sea, moving effortlessly between two worlds. It serves as a brief distraction from her unease, though the ominous weight of Mattie's stories lingers at the back of her mind. She glances at Charlie, wondering if he feels it too—that creeping sensation that they are stepping into something far more complicated than a wedding celebration. But Charlie, ever pragmatic, simply gathers their belongings, eager to disembark.

The chapter ends with their arrival, the boat docking against the weathered wood of the pier, the grandeur of the Folly rising in the distance. Hannah steps onto solid ground with a mixture of relief and apprehension, feeling as though she has crossed an invisible threshold into something unknown. The island, with its breathtaking beauty and unsettling past, awaits them, a stage set for celebration yet laced with an unshakable sense of foreboding.

Will: The Groom

In the wake of the wedding festivities, Will, known to many as "The Groom," retreats to the bathroom of the Folly, feeling the weight of the day’s events settle on him. The remnants of cake are smeared across his face, clinging to his skin in places he hadn’t even realized, reminding him of how quickly the joyful celebration turned chaotic. As he faces the mirror, the image of himself, covered in the symbols of what should have been a joyous occasion, feels like a cruel joke. The journey back to some semblance of normalcy, with a fierce wind fighting against him, offers a brief escape—a moment of peace where he can collect his thoughts before rejoining the group. Yet even in this fleeting moment of respite, the events of the evening continue to press on him, a reminder of how his carefully planned day has gone horribly awry.

The cake-feeding ceremony, once a symbol of marital unity, had spiraled into a spectacle, one that embarrassed him and left him questioning his every move. Worst of all was the undeniable presence of his father, whose gaze from across the room seemed to pierce through him with a silent disapproval. His father’s expression—a blend of grim satisfaction and barely concealed judgment—mirrored all the past disappointments Will had faced: the athletic failures, the academic struggles, the ever-present feeling that he had never quite measured up. It wasn’t just the cake incident that left him unsettled; it was the history behind his father’s eyes, those eyes that always seemed to silently echo the refrain of “I told you so.” The sting of paternal disapproval was a familiar one, but that didn’t make it any easier to bear.

But the disquiet isn’t solely rooted in his father’s judgment. Will can’t shake the unease that creeps in as he thinks about Jules’s reaction to the cake disaster. She had been angry, yes, but there was something else in her eyes, something more unsettling than the simple disruption of their wedding. Had she suspected something deeper, something he hadn’t even fully confronted within himself? The fear that Jules might

have uncovered a hidden truth that he wasn’t prepared to face sends a chill through him. In his mind, he clings to the hope that it’s all just a misunderstanding, that with a few words of reassurance, everything could be smoothed over and returned to normal.

As the weight of the day’s events sinks deeper into his consciousness, Will reflects on the fragile nature of the joy he had hoped to build. The realization comes slowly, like a wave breaking just below the surface, that the fragile happiness of their wedding might already be slipping away. He had worked so hard to craft the perfect celebration, yet it felt as though the very foundation of their new beginning was already starting to crumble. Will knows there is an urgency to return to the unfolding chaos, to confront the storm that looms over them, but for a moment, he is frozen, unsure of where to begin. The tapestry of their celebration, once so carefully woven, is starting to unravel, and he doesn’t know which thread to pull first to attempt to repair what is quickly falling apart.

In this chapter, Will is portrayed as a man caught in a tangled web of expectations, both the ones he has imposed on himself and those thrust upon him by others, especially his father. His reflection on the events of the day exposes a man struggling with his identity, his marriage, and his role within a family that has always expected more of him. As he stands at the precipice of what should have been the happiest day of his life, the weight of his past and the unknowns of his future create an emotional tug-of-war. Will is left to navigate the complexity of marriage, personal aspirations, and the crushing weight of unmet expectations, all while trying to hold together the remnants of a celebration that now seems far beyond his control.

Hannah: The Plus-One

The journey to the island is anything but smooth, with the boat ride serving as a metaphor for the turbulence beneath Hannah and Charlie’s seemingly stable relationship. *The Plus-One* invitation had initially felt like an opportunity for them to reconnect, but now, with the wind biting at her skin and the water churning beneath them, Hannah can’t shake the nausea creeping up her throat—an unsettling mirror of her unease about the weekend ahead. She studies Charlie, whose excitement about the wedding seems to outweigh his awareness of her discomfort, a stark reminder of how far they have drifted from the days when they moved in unison. Once, their love was effortless, filled with spontaneous getaways and whispered laughter in the dark, but now, their conversations revolve around childcare schedules and mortgage payments. Their relationship, while still intact, has shifted from passion to practicality, a change that leaves Hannah longing for something she can’t quite articulate. The Plus-One spot at this wedding, she hopes, will be an opportunity for them to find their way back to each other, away from the daily burdens of parenting and responsibility.

Stepping onto the island feels like entering another world, one where extravagance and nature collide in a breathtaking yet unforgiving landscape. The grandeur of the Folly, an architectural marvel set against the rugged cliffs, looms over them, a symbol of wealth and exclusivity that makes Hannah feel slightly out of place. Jules, their host, greets them with an effortless grace, her polished smile exuding confidence as she embraces Charlie just a little too warmly, making Hannah’s stomach twist. The tension is subtle, but unmistakable—Jules and Charlie share a history, one that Hannah has never fully understood, and perhaps, never wanted to. Around them, the other guests move like polished figures in a carefully curated tableau, dressed to perfection, their presence exuding an air of importance and privilege. The spectacle of the wedding, with its meticulous planning and opulence, contrasts with the untamed beauty of the island, making Hannah feel as though she’s stepped into a world where she does not

quite belong.

As they make their way toward the Folly, Hannah’s eyes land on Olivia, Jules’s younger half-sister, whose presence seems both hesitant and detached. There is something haunting about the girl, something in the way she stands apart from the others, as though she is carrying a weight no one else can see. The sight of Olivia stirs something in Hannah, a recognition of loneliness, of feeling like an outsider in a place that demands performance. She turns her gaze toward Will, Jules’s soon-to-be husband, whose undeniable charm and striking looks make him the kind of man people can’t help but watch. He moves through the crowd effortlessly, exuding a charisma that seems almost too polished, too perfect, as if it’s been carefully honed for public consumption. The contrast between him and Olivia, between his ease and her discomfort, speaks volumes—there are layers to this gathering, unspoken tensions simmering beneath the surface.

The island itself seems to echo these tensions, its raw beauty masking an underlying sense of unease. Towering cliffs, jagged and unyielding, stand as silent witnesses to the unfolding drama, while the crumbling ruins of an old chapel hint at a history of loss and forgotten promises. The chapel, soon to be the site of Jules and Will’s vows, carries an eerie, almost tragic beauty, a reminder that even the most carefully constructed foundations can succumb to time. As Hannah and Charlie continue toward their accommodations, she can’t shake the feeling that this weekend will be far more than just a wedding celebration. The island, with its haunting landscapes and whispering winds, holds stories of its own, waiting to unravel, just as the lives of those gathered here seem poised on the brink of something inevitable.

The day before: Aoife: The Wedding Planner

The day before the grand wedding of Will Slater and Julia Keegan, Aoife moves through the Folly with an air of quiet authority, her mind racing through a checklist of last-minute details. The atmosphere is charged with anticipation, and she knows from experience that beneath the veneer of celebration, tensions always simmer. She ensures that the crates of Guinness are chilled to perfection, the vintage Bollinger champagne is ready for toasts, and the marquee’s lighting is set to cast just the right glow over the evening’s festivities. Among the arriving guests, she takes note of subtle dynamics—the barely restrained energy of the best man and the ushers, their rowdiness already promising trouble, and the bride’s half-sister, Olivia, moving on the outskirts of the gathering, lost in her own world. Aoife has spent years observing these moments unfold, understanding that weddings, for all their joy, are also stages for unspoken resentments, rekindled tensions, and long-held secrets. Still, her role is to ensure that, at least for one day, everything appears seamless.

Her dedication to detail stems not just from professionalism but from personal experience—an unspoken desire to create beauty and order where life often offers only chaos. As she oversees the lighting of the turf fires, ensuring warmth and comfort for the rehearsal dinner, she exchanges a brief word with Freddy, her partner in both work and life, about the evening’s menu. The Connemara fisherman’s chowder, a nod to the island’s heritage, is simmering to perfection, alongside other carefully curated dishes that reflect both tradition and sophistication. Aoife finds solace in these small victories—ingredients prepared just right, logistics aligning flawlessly, a brief moment of calm before the inevitable whirlwind of the main event. But even amidst the controlled elegance of it all, she feels the weight of responsibility pressing against her. The Folly is more than just a venue; it is her passion, a chance to redefine herself and prove that this place, once dismissed as a relic, can become something extraordinary.

The grandeur of the event is evident in every carefully selected element, from the towering, four-tiered wedding cake—transported with painstaking care—to the intricate floral arrangements flown in to match Julia’s exacting standards. But beneath the surface of perfection, Aoife is acutely aware of the delicate balancing act required to hold everything together. She watches guests exchange glances, notes the laughter tinged with something unspoken, and wonders how many hidden dramas will unfold before the night is over. Despite all the opulence, she understands that her job is about more than just aesthetics—it is about preserving an illusion, offering a momentary escape from reality. For Aoife, this wedding marks not just another successful event but a turning point, a reaffirmation of the decision to leave Dublin behind and invest herself fully in this place, this dream, this island.

As the evening stretches on, she allows herself a rare moment of reflection, sharing a quiet drink with Freddy before the chaos fully sets in. The familiar knot of anxiety lingers in her chest, a mix of excitement and apprehension, the weight of knowing that any misstep could unravel the careful orchestration of months of work. Yet, as she watches the flickering candlelight dance against the stone walls of the Folly, she reminds herself why she does this—to create something lasting, even if only for a night. The air is thick with anticipation, the promise of celebration layered with something more elusive, more fragile. With a final deep breath, she straightens her shoulders and steps back into the night, ready to ensure that, at least for now, the illusion of perfection remains unbroken.

Johnno: The Best Man

Johnno wrestles with the painful realization that his friendship with Will has never been as solid as he once believed. While he had always recognized Will’s cunning nature, he assumed their bond would protect him from being on the receiving end of such ruthless behavior. That assumption shatters when he discovers that *The Best Man* he once trusted deliberately sabotaged his chance to co-host a television show, a project that was not only professionally promising but also deeply meaningful to him.

The revelation hits hard during an unexpected conversation with Piers, the producer of *Survive the Night*, who mistakenly believes Johnno had willingly stepped away from the project. With an offhand remark, Piers explains how Will and his agent framed Johnno’s supposed withdrawal, spinning a fabricated story about how he had hesitated and ultimately declined the opportunity. Johnno, who had been eagerly looking forward to showcasing his natural charisma and outdoor survival skills, is blindsided by the fact that Will orchestrated his removal behind his back.

As the weight of this deception sinks in, Johnno reflects on the magnitude of Will’s betrayal—not just on a personal level but in a way that directly impacts his career and future. The show had been his idea, envisioned as a dynamic partnership that played off their contrasting personalities—his rugged energy balanced against Will’s polished, effortless charm. Losing that opportunity stings, but what cuts even deeper is the knowledge that Will did not hesitate to take something so important away from him, using manipulation to eliminate him from the equation.

This moment of clarity forces Johnno to reassess their friendship, tracing back through years of shared experiences to find the cracks that had been there all along. He recalls subtle moments of competition, instances where Will always seemed to come out on top, often at someone else’s expense. Yet, Johnno had convinced himself that their

camaraderie was genuine, that beneath Will’s ambition, there was a level of respect and loyalty that kept their bond intact.

Now, with the truth staring him in the face, Johnno feels an overwhelming mix of anger, disappointment, and humiliation, realizing just how expendable he was in Will’s pursuit of personal gain. What makes it worse is that the opportunity had meant so much more than just a career move—it had been a chance for Johnno to carve out his own space in an industry that often overlooked people like him in favor of those with refined charm and connections. This wasn’t just about a TV show; it was about validation, about finally being recognized for something he was truly passionate about.

The sense of betrayal deepens as Johnno contemplates the professional implications of Will’s deception, understanding that the entertainment industry thrives on perception. By the time the truth surfaces—if it ever does—the opportunity may have already slipped beyond his grasp, leaving him powerless to undo the damage. Will’s ability to shape the narrative to his advantage proves just how calculated he is, using his influence to construct a reality that serves his interests while erasing Johnno’s rightful place in it.

As the conversation with Piers replays in his mind, Johnno struggles between confronting Will immediately or waiting to see just how far his lies would extend. He wonders if Will even realizes the depth of his betrayal or if he has justified it as a necessary move in his ongoing quest for success. The thought of facing him now, pretending nothing has changed, fills Johnno with an unsettling mix of emotions—rage, sadness, and an aching sense of loss for a friendship that may have never been as real as he once believed.

Before he can make a decision, Will approaches, exuding his usual confidence, completely unaware that Johnno has uncovered the truth. For a split second, Johnno considers playing along, testing how long Will will maintain the illusion of friendship before his lies unravel. But as Will smiles, oblivious to the storm brewing inside Johnno, it becomes clear that a reckoning is inevitable, and the next words spoken between them could forever alter the course of their friendship and careers.

Hannah: The Plus-One

Hannah senses a growing unease as the evening progresses, particularly in the way Johnno and the other ushers behave when alcohol flows freely. Their old public school camaraderie carries an unsettling undercurrent, as if beneath their rowdy laughter and inside jokes, something darker lurks. The Plus-One dynamic adds to her discomfort, as she watches her husband, Charlie, becoming absorbed in the crowd, laughing too loudly, lingering too long near Jules, and displaying an energy that feels unfamiliar. Charlie is typically mild-mannered, but alcohol strips away his restraint, turning him into someone unpredictable, a version of himself that Hannah neither trusts nor likes. The sight of him, swept up in the energy of men who thrive on excess, leaves Hannah torn between anger and concern, unsure if she should intervene or step back and let him make his own mistakes.

Duncan, one of the ushers, makes a sharp remark, teasing Hannah about controlling Charlie, a comment laced with the kind of casual cruelty often disguised as humor. Instead of defending Hannah, Charlie, clearly embarrassed, chooses to align himself with the ushers, laughing it off and drinking more as if proving his allegiance. Hannah watches in silence, realizing that trying to pull Charlie away would only push him deeper into their influence. The decision is not hers to make—Charlie has chosen to engage, to drink, to step into their world of juvenile bravado, even at the cost of their relationship. A part of her wants to warn him, to tell him that he doesn’t need their validation, but another part of her knows it would be useless. As he clinks glasses with them, already half-drunkenly absorbed in their antics, Hannah feels a sharp pang of detachment, as if the man she married has momentarily vanished.

The energy of the evening turns more chaotic as the ushers chant their old school motto, their voices rising in drunken unison. What might have once been a nostalgic call to youthful recklessness now takes on a more menacing tone, an intoxicating

blend of arrogance and danger. The chant becomes a signal for escalating debauchery, their uninhibited behavior taking on a cult-like intensity that makes Hannah’s skin crawl. The night descends further into games meant to test limits, one particularly vile challenge forcing the losers to drink a grotesque concoction, more humiliation than entertainment. The cruelty of it, masked as harmless fun, reinforces the toxic dynamic of the group, where brotherhood is built on shared degradation. Hannah watches, repulsed, her discomfort morphing into a silent resolve—she wants no part of this night, no part of this world that Charlie seems so eager to belong to.

Needing an escape, she quietly slips away to the drawing room, craving solitude, only to find Olivia already there. The tension of the evening lifts slightly as they fall into conversation, their interaction tinged with the ease of teenage rebellion, as if escaping the chaos outside has created an unspoken bond between them. For the first time that night, Hannah feels a sliver of relief, the warmth of human connection momentarily easing the sharp edges of her discontent. Their moment of camaraderie is short-lived, however, as Angus, stumbling and slurring, crashes into the room, a reminder that the madness outside is still unfolding. The disruption shatters their temporary refuge, pulling them back into the reality of the night’s unraveling.

The chapter captures the discomfort of watching a loved one change under the influence of peer pressure and alcohol, the conflict between intervention and self-preservation. Hannah and Olivia’s quiet moment in the drawing room offers a brief reprieve, a stark contrast to the chaos that defines the rest of the evening. Yet even in that solace, the night’s tension lingers, a reminder that no one on this island is truly escaping anything.

Jules: The Bride

Jules moves stiffly across the dance floor, her hand clasped in Will’s as they sway to the music, but the joyous atmosphere of the reception feels hollow. The band plays lively tunes, the guests cheer and raise their glasses, yet none of it can quiet the gnawing unease creeping through her. The weight of the evening’s earlier incidents—the prank by the ushers, the strange, suggestive speech—settles heavily on her shoulders, each moment replaying in her mind like a puzzle missing a crucial piece. She forces herself to smile, to keep up the charade of a blissful bride, but beneath the surface, her thoughts churn relentlessly. The words spoken during the speech, veiled in humor yet laden with a deeper meaning, have unsettled her in ways she cannot fully articulate. It was meant to be lighthearted, a jest among friends, yet there was something in the delivery that suggested more—a hidden truth wrapped in laughter, a secret buried beneath the surface.

As they continue dancing, Jules becomes more attuned to the undercurrents of the evening. She notices the exaggerated expressions of delight among the guests, their laughter a little too loud, their movements more uninhibited as the alcohol flows freely. The celebration has taken on an almost surreal quality, the revelers moving with an abandon that seems disconnected from the growing tension she feels. Will, usually so composed, seems different tonight—not just distracted but slightly off-balance, as if something is pressing on him as well. His grip on her waist is firmer than usual, his movements a fraction too stiff, and it dawns on her that he, too, is acting. He is playing a role, just as she is, pretending that nothing is wrong, that the night is unfolding exactly as planned. But Jules knows better. The nervous energy radiating from him, the way he avoids direct eye contact whenever she tries to probe for answers—it all adds to the growing sense that something is being deliberately concealed.

Determined to push past the unease, she asks Will directly about the speech, about the unsettling remarks that seemed to hint at something more than mere bachelor-party antics. At first, he brushes it off, dismissing it as Johnno’s drunken ramblings, the kind of harmless teasing that men indulge in during weddings. But his casual tone is too practiced, too rehearsed, and when she presses further, she sees a flicker of something else—frustration, maybe even anger—flash across his features. The moment is brief, gone in an instant, replaced by an easygoing smile, but Jules doesn’t miss it. His fingers tighten slightly on her wrist, the pressure barely noticeable yet enough to make her aware of the subtle shift in his demeanor. It isn’t the grip of a man dancing with his new wife; it is a reminder, a silent insistence that she drop the subject. Her pulse quickens, though she keeps her expression neutral, unwilling to let him see the fear stirring beneath her carefully composed facade.

Will’s demeanor softens almost immediately, his grip loosening, his voice dropping to a gentle murmur of reassurance. He plays the part well, slipping back into the charming, affectionate husband she has always known, but something has changed for Jules. The illusion of perfection, of stability, is cracking, and she can feel the tension coiling beneath the surface of their carefully curated moment. The guests around them are oblivious, lost in their own revelry, unaware that beneath the fairy-tale exterior of the wedding, shadows are beginning to take form. Jules realizes that she no longer trusts Will’s explanations, that the night’s events have planted doubts she cannot ignore. The celebration may still be in full swing, but for her, the evening has taken a darker turn. And as she looks into Will’s eyes, she knows, with growing certainty, that whatever secrets linger in the background of their marriage will not remain hidden forever.

Olivia: The Bridesmaid

Olivia’s account in *The Bridesmaid* begins with the relentless discomfort of residing beneath Jules and Will’s bedroom, where every intimate detail of their life filters through the poorly soundproofed ceiling. Each muffled laugh and whispered word feels invasive, amplifying Olivia’s sense of being an outsider in a world she doesn’t belong to. Seeking escape, she considers wandering the island at night, an idea tempting yet tinged with danger given the island’s rugged terrain and haunting solitude. Her isolation is compounded by a growing detachment from her friends since university, leaving her to battle her struggles alone. One of these battles, her tendency toward self-injury, surfaces briefly as a coping mechanism before being interrupted by Jules’s arrival, intent on ensuring *The Bridesmaid* dress fits perfectly for the upcoming wedding.

The interaction between Jules and Olivia quickly shifts from surface-level civility to a tense interplay of unspoken truths and veiled concerns. Jules, always poised and determined, embodies the bride-to-be’s perfectionist archetype, focused on the details that will make her wedding flawless. Olivia, in contrast, is adrift, her life marked by inertia and emotional detachment, which are reflected in her resistance to engaging fully with the dress fitting or the role she is expected to play. The process, initially mundane, becomes a symbolic representation of their relationship—a fragile bond held together by obligation rather than mutual understanding. Jules’s silent observations of Olivia’s weight loss and the faint scars on her arms suggest a recognition of deeper issues, yet she refrains from voicing her concerns, choosing instead to address the matter indirectly. Olivia, aware of Jules’s scrutiny, retreats further into herself, her inner monologue revealing a whirlwind of self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy.

In Jules’s impeccably decorated bedroom—a space that already feels oppressive due to Olivia’s earlier auditory intrusions—the fitting becomes an emotional confrontation,

though few words are exchanged. Jules's sharp eye catches every detail, from the loose fit of the dress to Olivia's pale complexion, though her comments are carefully framed as practical observations rather than genuine worry. For Olivia, standing before the mirror beside Jules only sharpens the contrast between them. Jules, radiant and composed, seems to embody everything Olivia cannot be—confident, successful, and rooted in her identity. The shared reflection feels less like a moment of sisterly connection and more like an exposure of Olivia's shortcomings, leaving her feeling smaller, more invisible.

Despite this tension, an unexpected softness emerges from Jules—a fleeting moment where she reaches out to Olivia, her touch almost tender. It is a rare glimpse of vulnerability from the otherwise pragmatic Jules, an effort to bridge the widening gap between them. Yet Olivia, overwhelmed by the weight of her internal struggles and the pressure of Jules's expectations, cannot reciprocate. The gesture, though well-intentioned, falls flat, highlighting the disconnect between them. Jules is firmly grounded in the reality of her wedding and the life she is building, while Olivia remains trapped in a cycle of self-doubt and unresolved trauma, unable to meet Jules halfway.

The chapter concludes with a symbolic act of defiance from Olivia, a quiet yet profound rejection of her role in Jules's carefully curated world. Whether it's the way she brushes off Jules's advice, the lack of enthusiasm she displays, or her deliberate refusal to fully engage with the preparations, it's clear that Olivia is not just rejecting the dress but the expectations that come with it. As she leaves the room, her disoriented steps mirror the chaos within her—a young woman lost in the shadow of her past, uncertain of her place in the present. This moment encapsulates the essence of their strained relationship, a poignant mix of missed connections, unspoken truths, and the pain of loving someone you no longer fully understand.

Now: The wedding night

On *the wedding night*, Angus, Femi, and Duncan are thrust into an atmosphere filled with an eerie sense of mystery and danger, made all the more intense by the lingering effects of a storm that has just passed. The storm, which had raged fiercely just moments before, now leaves behind a silence that seems to stretch on forever. Angus, clearly uneasy, picks up a solitary shoe from the ground, looking at it with confusion and a hint of suspicion, as he wonders who it belongs to. Femi, while also disturbed, struggles to recognize the shoe’s owner, acknowledging that it seems familiar but ultimately unable to pinpoint any logical connection. The events of the day feel distant and dreamlike, as if they were merely fleeting moments in a larger, more unsettling narrative that has now taken hold of their lives. The contrast between the wedding festivities that were meant to be joyful and the tension they now feel creates an overwhelming sense of disorientation, with the storm's aftermath leaving them in an atmosphere charged with foreboding uncertainty.

In an attempt to make sense of the situation, Angus proposes that they keep the shoe as a clue, believing it might offer some insight into the chaotic events of the night. However, Femi, still cautious and unsure, insists that they leave it where it is, emphasizing that the shoe, along with a strange crown they’ve discovered, could be evidence in a case far more significant than they initially thought. He warns against rushing into conclusions without considering the potential consequences of tampering with things that might be linked to the disturbing circumstances unfolding around them. Their tense conversation is suddenly interrupted by Duncan, who sharply rebukes Angus for even suggesting that they handle what could be vital evidence. His response is filled with urgency, as he underscores the gravity of the situation they find themselves in. The trio now realizes that their actions, no matter how seemingly small, could have profound repercussions, and they are standing on the precipice of a much

larger and darker mystery than any of them had anticipated.

As the tension between them grows, something strange happens—the storm that had once been a roaring force of nature now ceases, leaving an unnerving silence in its wake. The world around them seems to hold its breath, the silence so complete that it presses in on their senses, amplifying every sound, every movement, every beat of their hearts. It’s as if the very atmosphere has shifted, turning the once-violent storm into an almost unnatural stillness that heightens their growing unease. The absence of the storm feels unnatural, almost as if the world has paused, waiting for something even worse to unfold. The silence, instead of offering comfort, only deepens their sense of vulnerability, making them hyperaware of their every step, every sound they make, and the terrifying unknown that lies ahead.

Despite their anxiety and the darkness surrounding them, the trio pushes forward, their determination to uncover the truth propelling them onward. Eventually, through the pitch-black night, they catch a glimpse of the Folly in the distance, its windows faintly glowing in the limited light. The building, once a familiar and perhaps comforting sight, now feels like an ominous landmark, a place that holds secrets far more unsettling than any of them could have imagined. Femi, leading the group, comes to an abrupt stop, his instincts suddenly alert to a change in the air, as though something is watching them or waiting for them to make their next move. He turns to the others, sensing that they are not alone, that there is more to the situation than they have yet uncovered. The uncertainty of what lies ahead fills the air, and the sense of danger grows even more pronounced.

The trio now stands frozen, caught between the familiar and the unknown, as their surroundings seem to close in around them. Each of them feels the weight of their emotions—fear, confusion, and an unsettling realization that they are caught in a web of events far more dangerous than any of them anticipated. Their journey, which began as an attempt to resolve a simple mystery, now seems to lead them deeper into a dark and treacherous path that none of them fully understands. The Folly, with its ominous presence, seems to be drawing them in, as though it is the heart of this

looming mystery. They know they must proceed, but they are no longer sure whether they are walking toward answers or toward an even darker truth. As they move forward, their every step is filled with uncertainty, and the oppressive silence around them makes it clear that the night holds far more secrets than they are ready to uncover.



Earlier that day: Jules: The Bride

The Bride wakes up on her wedding day, her heart weighed down by an inexplicable sense of unease. The remnants of the previous night’s festivities still linger in her mind, mingling with the unsettling fragments of a vivid dream that disturbs her morning. Even though her fiancé, Will, has adhered to the traditional custom of sleeping separately before their wedding, The Bride feels a deep longing for his presence. She wishes she could share the excitement, the nerves, and the anticipation of the day with him, but instead, she is left to grapple with the solitude of the morning, feeling a growing sense of separation between them. As she prepares for the big day, her wedding dress—a delicate balance of tradition and sensuality—sits ready, waiting for her to slip into it. The dress, like her, embodies duality, a mix of innocence and allure, signifying the conflicting elements of her character that she is about to present to the world in her vows.

Through the window, Jules observes Olivia standing near the water's edge, the sea dangerously close beneath her feet. For a fleeting moment, concern for her friend’s safety rises within Jules, but she quickly redirects her focus back to her preparations. As she watches Olivia, she feels a sharp pang of anxiety, only to push it away with determination. Choosing to embrace her independence, Jules decides to apply her makeup without assistance, emulating the calm grace of Kate Middleton, who applied her makeup alone on her own wedding day. This choice becomes an important act of self-reliance, an attempt to take control of this defining moment without leaning on anyone else for emotional support, even though the weight of the wedding day’s expectations continues to press on her.

However, in the midst of this personal ritual, an unexpected disturbance interrupts Jules’s focus—a spill reveals a hidden note among her things. As she retrieves the note, a cold shiver runs through her. It’s the same note she had previously tried to

dismiss—a warning about Will’s supposed deceitful nature. The note stirs up deep-rooted fears she thought had been buried long ago. Its resurfacing feels like a betrayal, an unwelcome reminder of the doubts that have hovered over her relationship with Will, doubts that have been fueled by his semi-public persona and the anonymous criticisms they have faced together in the past. As the note threatens to cloud her thoughts, Jules feels a rush of conflicting emotions, ranging from disbelief to betrayal, yet she can’t help but linger on the words.



The note’s ominous tone feels personal, as though it was crafted by someone who knows her intimately, someone within her circle who has chosen to expose these doubts at the most inopportune time. The recognition that it could be someone close to her causes a surge of anxiety, and Jules is torn between wanting to preserve the note as a reminder and needing to rid herself of the unsettling thoughts it brings. Initially, she considers keeping it—perhaps to examine its implications further—but then, in a sudden moment of clarity, she decides to destroy it. By tearing the note into pieces, Jules symbolically rids herself of the doubts and fears it has ignited within her. In that moment, she feels a fleeting sense of relief as she watches the paper disintegrate, hoping that this small act will restore some semblance of peace to her mind as the wedding draws nearer.

Despite her efforts to dismiss the impact of the note, its warning continues to linger in the back of Jules's mind, like an ever-present shadow. Though she attempts to push the thoughts away and focus on the joyful occasion ahead, they remain, unsettling her at every turn. The presence of the note, even in its destruction, represents something deeper within her—an unresolved tension in her relationship with Will, and the unspoken fears about their future. She is not only grappling with external pressures—the expectations of the wedding, the eyes of their guests—but also with the weight of her own internal doubts. These feelings of uncertainty and distrust continue to echo in her thoughts, forcing her to confront the complexity of her emotions on the day she should feel most assured.

Jules’s struggle is more than just about dealing with a piece of paper—it's about coming to terms with the conflict between her public role as a bride and the private doubts she harbors about the man she is about to marry. As she moves forward with her preparations, the remnants of the note's message echo within her, a constant reminder of the unresolved tensions she has tried to ignore. The act of destroying it may have given her a momentary sense of control, but the lingering feelings of doubt and unease suggest that this is just the beginning of her internal battle. The journey she is about to embark on, from the altar to the unknowns of marriage, carries with it the weight of unanswered questions, and Jules realizes that the trust she has in Will is something that must be built, not just assumed.

Now: The wedding night

In the chilling chapter titled *The Wedding Night*, the once-joyful atmosphere of a celebratory gathering has been consumed by the weight of a terrible tragedy. What should have been an evening filled with joy and love has turned into a haunting tableau of death and disbelief. A group of people stands frozen in shock around a lifeless body, the grim reality of the situation setting in with each passing moment. Femi, a skilled surgeon accustomed to life-and-death decisions, bends over the body with a professional calmness, desperately searching for any sign of life. His fingers move swiftly, checking for a pulse, listening for breath, but the body before him remains cold, unyielding to his efforts. The unseeing eyes stare upward, the slack jaw a macabre confirmation of death, and the bloodstain that spreads across the chest is the final, unmistakable marker of the tragedy. The storm howls around them, the noise of the wind almost deafening, heightening the isolation and despair. The powerlessness of the situation weighs heavily on the group, with nothing but the rustling of foil blankets and soft, panicked whispers filling the silence.

In this tense and suffocating atmosphere, the group is so absorbed in the corpse before them that they fail to notice the other figure emerging from the shadows. Slowly, as if summoned by the storm itself, a figure steps forward into the flickering torchlight, their presence sending a ripple of fear through the gathered crowd. At first, the sight is almost surreal—this figure, drenched in blood from head to toe, appears to have stepped out of some dark, ancient myth. The blood is not just a faint trace but a disturbing smear, covering the person’s shirt, dripping from their wrists, and staining their neck and jaw in grotesque fashion. The sight is so jarring, so alien, that it seems impossible for the group to process what they are witnessing. Soft sobs escape the figure’s lips, adding a chilling layer to the scene, but it is the gleaming knife clutched in their hand that steals the group’s attention.

The knife, with its mother-of-pearl handle gleaming in the torchlight, now seems entirely out of place in the context of death and bloodshed. This was not just any blade; it had once served a celebratory purpose, a tool to slice through a wedding cake during a moment of joy. Now, it has been transformed into an instrument of violence, its sharp edge soaked in blood, marking the shift from joy to horror. The contrast between the blade's elegance and the grisly scene it now signifies is stark, making the group freeze in place, unsure of how to react to what they are witnessing. The knife's sinister presence serves as an unwelcome punctuation to the night's disastrous turn, an undeniable symbol of how quickly everything can spiral from light into darkness.

As the figure stands before them, the group slowly begins to realize who it is, but the image before them is so grotesque that it seems almost impossible to reconcile with the person they once knew. The transformation in the figure is more than physical—this is someone who has been irrevocably changed by the events that have unfolded. The bloodstains on their clothes and the knife in their hand speak to something much darker than anyone could have imagined, a revelation that throws the group into a state of confusion and fear. They begin to piece together the events, trying to understand what happened, but there is an unspoken understanding that things have gone far beyond a simple tragedy.

The emotional weight of the moment grows heavier as the figure, still sobbing, begins to speak, their words breaking the heavy silence. But each word seems like a cruel confirmation that this was no accident, no moment of misguided chaos—it was deliberate, planned, and executed with a coldness that chills the heart. The group, still in shock, now faces the daunting realization that this tragedy is far more complex than they had initially thought. They are not just witnesses to an unfortunate death but are now entangled in a web of emotions, guilt, and consequences that stretch far beyond the present moment.

The storm outside intensifies, reflecting the turmoil within the group and the figure before them. As rain lashes against the walls and wind howls through the cracks, it seems as though nature itself is bearing witness to the terror that has unfolded. The

bog beneath them, dark and silent, stands as a grim reminder of the grave they now find themselves in—both metaphorically and literally. Will they be able to make sense of the night’s events, or will this moment of horror leave them shattered forever? The rain, relentless and unforgiving, mirrors the grief that begins to settle over the group, a grief that will not be easily dispelled.

As the figure continues to stand in front of them, the realization of their connection to the death of the body in the center of the group becomes clearer. There is a sense of finality in the air, a sense that something has been irrevocably broken, and the truth, however painful, is now unavoidable. The group is forced to confront their own role in the tragedy and the way their relationships have been shaped by secrets and lies. The dark night, the howling storm, and the bloodstained figure are all part of a larger, more intricate story that has yet to fully unfold. The question that lingers is not just about the fate of the figure, but the future of the group—their ability to move past the night’s events or be forever marked by the choices that were made.

The day before: Olivia: The Bridesmaid

In the chapter of *The day before: OLIVIA: The Bridesmaid***,** In the cave the sea has come in, so it’s practically lapping at our feet, the water black as ink. It makes the space feel smaller, more claustrophobic. Hannah and I have to sit nearer to each other than we did before, our knees touching, a candle we nicked from the drawing room perched on the rock in front of us in its glass lantern. Now I understand why it’s called the Whispering Cave. The high water has changed the acoustics in here so that this time everything we say is whispered back to us, as though someone’s standing there in the shadows, repeating every word. It’s hard to believe there isn’t. I find myself turning to check, every so often, to make certain we’re alone.

I can’t make Hannah out all that well in the soft light of the candle. But I can hear her breathing, smell her perfume. We pass the bottle of vodka between us. I’m already a bit drunk, I think, from dinner. I couldn’t eat much and the booze went straight to my head. But I need to be drunker to tell her, drunk enough that my brain can’t stop the words. Which seems silly, as recently I have been needing to tell someone about it so badly that sometimes I feel like it’s going to erupt out of me, without any warning. But now it has actually come down to it, I feel tongue-tied.

Hannah speaks first. ‘Olivia.’

The cave replies in a whisper: Olivia, Olivia, Olivia.

‘God,’ Hannah says, ‘that echo. Did your ex … did he do anything to you? Someone I know—’ She stops, starts again, ‘my sister, Alice. She had this boyfriend when she was at university. And he reacted really badly to the break-up. I mean, really really badly—’

I wait for Hannah to say more, but she doesn’t. Instead she takes the bottle from me and has a very long drink, about four shots’ worth.

‘No, it wasn’t anything like that,’ I say. ‘Yeah, Callum was a bit of a shit. I mean, he wasn’t very subtle about hooking up with Ellie straight after. But he was the one who broke it off, so it wasn’t that.’ I grab the bottle from her, take a big gulp. I can taste her lipstick on the rim. ‘It was in the summer holidays after term had ended. I was staying at Jules’s place in Islington, while she was away for work for a few days.’

I speak into the darkness, the cave whispering my own words back to me. I find myself telling Hannah how lonely I felt. How I was in this great big city, which I’ve always found so exciting, but realised I had no one to share it with. How it was Friday night and I’d gone to the Sainsbury’s down the road from Jules’s flat and bought myself some crisps, milk and cereal for the morning, and how my walk home took me past all these people standing outside pubs, drinking, having a laugh in the sun. How I felt like such a fucking saddo, with my orange carrier bag and a night of Netflix to look forward to. How it was at times like that that I always thought of Callum, and what we might be doing together, which made me feel even more alone.

I still can’t quite believe I’m telling her all this, when I hardly know her. But maybe that’s the point. Maybe, of all the people here, she’s the one person I can tell, because she’s basically a stranger. The vodka definitely helps, too, and the fact that it’s so gloomy in here that I can hardly see her face. Even so, I don’t think I can tell her all of it. The thought of doing that makes me feel panicky. But maybe I can start at the beginning and see if, once I’ve told her most of it, I’m brave enough to tell her the whole thing.

‘I was on my phone,’ I say, ‘and I could see that Callum was with Ellie. She’d shared all these pics on Snapchat. There was one of her sitting on his lap. And then another one of her kissing him, while she held one middle finger up to the camera like she didn’t want anyone to take the picture … except then she went and shared it for the whole world to see, for fuck’s sake.’

Hannah takes a drink from the bottle, breathes out. ‘That must have made you feel pretty awful,’ she says. ‘Seeing that. Jeez, social media has a lot to answer for.’

‘Yeah.’ I shrug. ‘It did make me feel a bit … shit.’ In case I sound like a total stalker I don’t tell her how many times I looked at those photos, how I sat there clutching my Sainsbury’s bag and crying while I did it. ‘My mates had been saying I should have some fun,’ I say. ‘You know, like show Callum what he was missing. They kept telling me to get myself on some dating apps, but I didn’t want to do it at uni, where it was all so incestuous.’

‘What, apps like Tinder?’

I think she’s trying to show she’s down with the kids.

‘Yeah, but no one really uses Tinder any more.’

‘Sorry,’ she says. ‘I’m ancient, remember. What do I know?’ She says it a bit wistfully.

‘You’re not that old,’ I tell her.

‘Well … thanks.’ Her knee bumps against mine.

I take another swig of vodka. And remember how that night in Jules’s flat I drank some of her wine, which made me realise how all the stuff we drank at uni for £3 a glass in the local bars tasted like absolute piss. I remember how I felt quite sophisticated walking around in my pants and bra with one of her big glasses. I imagined it was my flat, that I was going to go out and find some man and bring him back here and screw him. And that would show Callum.

Obviously I didn’t actually plan to do that. I’d only had sex with one person before, with Callum. And even that had been pretty tame.

‘I set up a profile,’ I tell Hannah. ‘I decided in London it was different. In London I could go on a date and it wouldn’t be all over the whole of campus the next morning.’

‘I’m kind of impressed,’ Hannah says. ‘I’d never have been brave enough to do something like that. But weren’t you, you know … worried about safety?’

‘No,’ I say. ‘I’m not an idiot. I didn’t use my real name. Or my age.’

‘Ah,’ Hannah nods. ‘Right.’ I get the impression she’s not convinced by that and is trying very hard not to say anything else.

I put my age as twenty-six, in fact. The profile photo I put up didn’t even look like me. I ransacked Jules’s closet, did my make-up perfectly. But it was kind of the point not to look like me.

‘I called myself Bella,’ I say. ‘You know, as in Hadid?’

I tell Hannah how I sat there on the bed and scrolled through photos of all these guys until my eyes burned. ‘Most of them were rank,’ I say. ‘In the gym, like lifting up their shirts, or wearing sunglasses that they thought made them look cool.’ I almost gave up.

‘But I did match with this one guy,’ I tell Hannah. ‘He caught my eye. He was … different.’

I made the first move. So unlike me, but I was a bit pissed from Jules’s wine.

Free to meet up? I wrote.
Yes, his reply came. I’d like that, Bella. When suits you?
How about this evening?
There was a long pause. Then: You don’t hang about.
This is my only free evening for the next few weeks. I liked how that sounded. Like I had better places to be.
Fine, he messaged back. It’s a date.

‘What was he like?’ Hannah asks, her chin in her hand. She seems fascinated, watching me closely.
‘Hotter than his photo. And a bit older than me.’
‘How much older?’
‘Um … maybe fifteen years?’
‘OK.’ Is she trying not to sound shocked? ‘And what was he like? When you actually met up?’

I think back. It's hard for me to see him as he appeared at the beginning. 'I guess I thought he was hot. And … he seemed like more of a man. He made Callum look like a boy in comparison.' He had broad shoulders, like he worked out a lot, and a tan. In comparison, Callum was a scrawny little pretty boy. Proper men were my new thing, I decided. 'But,' I shrug, even though she can't see me. 'I don't know. I suppose however hot he was, at first, a part of me would have preferred him to be Callum.'

Hannah nods. 'Yeah,' she says sympathetically. 'I get that. When you've got your heart set on someone Brad Pitt could walk in and he wouldn't be enough—'

'Brad Pitt is really fucking old,' I say.

'Um – Harry Styles?'

That almost makes me smile. 'Yeah. Maybe. Or Timothée Chalamet.' I always thought Callum looked a bit like him.

'But Callum probably hadn't thought about me for a moment, especially not while Ellie's stupid big tits were in his face.' I told myself I had better stop fucking thinking about him.

'And did this guy … what was his name?'

'Steven.'

'Did he say anything? When you met, about you being so much younger?'

I give her a look. That sounded a bit judge-y.

'Sorry,' she says, with a laugh. 'But, seriously, did he?'

'Yeah, he did. He asked me if I was really twenty-six. But he didn't say it in a suspicious way, more like it was, I dunno – a joke we were both in on. It didn't really seem to matter to him, not then. And he was nice,' I say, though it's hard to remember that now. 'I was having a good time. He laughed at all my jokes. He asked me loads of questions about myself.'

I cast my mind back to that night. Being in that bar with the drinks going to my head – I was drinking Negronis because I thought that would make me seem older. 'My original plan was to get a photo,' I say, 'post it to my Instagram.' Let Callum see what he was missing.

‘I’m guessing …’ Hannah looks at me, ‘a bit more than that happened?’
‘Yeah.’ I take a gulp of vodka.
There was this moment, I remember, when I thought maybe he was going to say goodbye, but he opened the door of the cab and turned to me and said: ‘Well, are you getting in?’ And in the taxi (not even an Uber, a proper black cab), how this little voice kept piping up: What are you doing? You hardly know him! But the drunk part of me, the part of me that was up for it, kept telling it to shut up.

We went back to Jules’s place, because he’d just moved house and didn’t have any proper furniture. I felt a bit bad about it, but I told myself I’d wash the sheets.
‘Wow,’ he said. ‘This is impressive. And it all belongs to you?’
‘Yeah,’ I said, feeling like I’d got a whole lot more sophisticated in his eyes.
‘And then we had sex,’ I tell Hannah. ‘I guess I wanted to do it before the booze wore off.’
‘Was it good?’ Hannah asks. She sounds excited. And then: ‘I haven’t had sex for ages. Sorry. I know that’s TMI.’

I try not to think of her and Charlie having sex. ‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘It was a bit – y’know. A bit rough? He pushed me up against the wall, pushed my skirt up around my waist, pulled my knickers down. And he— Can I have a bit more of that?’ Hannah passes me the bottle and I take a quick slug.
‘He went down on me, even though I hadn’t had a shower. He said he preferred it like that.’

‘I got a bit nervous,’ I said. ‘Especially of having to introduce him to Jules. And there were all these free drinks. I had way too many of them, to try and feel more confident. I made a total twat of myself. I had to go and be sick in the loos – I was a state. And then Steven put me in a cab back to Jules’s, and I couldn’t even ask him to come with me because she would be there later on. I remember him counting out the notes to the cab driver. And then asking him to make sure I got home safe, like I was a child.’

‘He should have gone with you,’ Hannah says. ‘He should have made sure you were all right. Not left it to some taxi driver.’
I shrug. ‘Maybe. But I was such a fucking embarrassment. I’m not surprised he wanted to be rid of me.’

I remember watching him out of the window and thinking: I’ve blown it. And thinking, if I were him, maybe I’d just go back inside and hang out with people my own age who could hold their booze.

‘After that he started ghosting me.’ In case she doesn’t know what that means I say, ‘You know, like not replying? Even though I could see the two little blue ticks.’
She nods.

‘I went back to uni. One night I got a bit drunk and sad after a night out and I sent him ten messages. I tried to call him on the walk to Halls at two a.m. He didn’t answer. Didn’t reply to my texts. I knew I’d never see him again.’

‘Shit,’ Hannah says.
‘Yeah.’
‘So was that it?’ she asks, when I don’t say any more. ‘Did you see him again?’ And then, when I don’t answer: ‘Olivia?’

But I can’t speak. It’s like I was under some sort of spell before, it was so easy to talk. Now it feels as though the words are stuck in my throat.

There’s this image in my brain. Red on white. All the blood.

When we get back to the Folly, Hannah says she’s knackered. ‘Straight to bed for me,’ she says. I get it. It was different in the cave. Sitting there in the dark with the vodka and the candlelight, it felt like we could say anything. Now it feels almost like we overshared. Like we crossed a line.

I know I won’t be able to go to sleep, though, especially not while all the blokes are still playing their game outside my room. So I stand against the wall outside for a bit and

try to slow down the thoughts racing round my head.

‘Hello there.’

I nearly jump out of my skin. ‘What the fuck—’

It’s the best man, Johnno. I don’t like him. I saw how he looked at me earlier. And he’s drunk – I can tell that, and I’m pretty drunk. In the light spilling from the dining room I can see him give a big grin, more of a leer. ‘Fancy a puff?’ He holds out a big joint, sickly smell of weed. I can see it’s wet on the end where it’s been in his mouth.

‘No thanks,’ I say.

‘Very well-behaved.’

I make to go inside, but as I reach for the door he catches my arm, his hand tight about it. ‘You know, we should have a dance tomorrow, you and I. Best man and the bridesmaid.’

I shake my head.

He steps nearer, pulls me closer to him. He’s so much bigger than me. But he wouldn’t do anything right here, would he? Not with everyone upstairs?

‘You should think about it,’ he says. ‘Might surprise you. An older man.’

‘Get the fuck off me,’ I hiss. I think of my razor blade, upstairs. I wish I had it with me, just so I knew it was there.

Johnno: The Best Man

As *The Best Man* prepares for Will's wedding, he can't help but reflect on the evolution of their friendship. Though Will’s newfound fame in the television world has subtly shifted the dynamic between them, Johnno is resolute in his decision to be there for his friend. Their bond, solidified years ago during their time at Trevellyan’s school, is something Johnno values deeply. Despite feeling somewhat estranged due to Will’s rise in the public eye, he remains committed to fulfilling his role as best man. His sense of loyalty pushes him to persevere, even though the uncomfortable, ill-fitting suit he's been forced to wear is a constant reminder of how out of place he feels. The sharp contrast between his own appearance and Will’s impeccable look serves as a silent reflection of the growing divide between their lives, yet Johnno is determined to support his friend.

As he navigates through the pre-wedding preparations, the arrival of their old friends—Duncan, Pete, Femi, and Angus—offers a sense of familiarity and nostalgia. Their lighthearted banter and shared memories of their school days serve as a comforting reminder of the bond they all once shared. They laugh about past pranks and the mischief they created together, which, despite the years that have passed, seems to bring them back to simpler times. It’s clear that their friendship is built on shared history, and despite the changes that life has thrown their way, the camaraderie between them remains intact. The conversations take on a humorous tone as they joke about their days at school, and Johnno, despite his discomfort in his ill-fitting suit, finds himself drawn into the banter. This moment of shared laughter, though fleeting, reveals how deeply their connection runs, a bond forged through their experiences of growing up together, which still resonates in their interactions as adults.

However, the humor takes a slight dip when Will casually mentions an old prank involving seaweed placed in his and Jules's bed—a reminder of their school-day antics. This moment, while intended to be lighthearted, causes a brief but noticeable strain between the friends. Johnno, along with the others, quickly denies involvement in the prank, a typical reaction from a group that once thrived on mischief. Yet, beneath the surface of this innocent denial lies a deeper layer of unspoken tension. The prank is a reminder that, while they may have moved beyond their adolescent mischief, the lines between loyalty, fun, and adulthood have become more complex. The transition from carefree joking to adult responsibility is palpable, and Johnno feels the weight of this shift, understanding that their friendship—though still rooted in shared history—must now evolve as they navigate the challenges of adulthood.

As they prepare to leave for the chapel, Charlie enters the scene, awkwardly collecting buttonholes for the ceremony. His clumsy but endearing manner injects a moment of levity into the proceedings, drawing a brief burst of laughter from the group of men. This moment, though light, underscores the lingering immaturity that still defines their friendship, even as they are all on the cusp of entering the more serious chapters of their lives. It's a reminder that, despite the adult setting of a wedding and the responsibilities they now face, the essence of who they were—young, mischievous, and full of laughter—still lingers. It's a subtle moment, but it adds another layer of depth to the group's dynamic, showing that no matter how far they've come, they still share the same playful spirit that once defined their youth.

Before heading to the chapel, Will pulls Johnno aside for a private moment, and though the conversation is brief, it carries an emotional weight that Johnno cannot ignore. There is an underlying sense that something is left unsaid between them, a deeper aspect of their friendship that has yet to be fully addressed. This private exchange, set against the backdrop of a wedding that marks such a pivotal point in both of their lives, makes Johnno aware that their relationship is more complex than he initially realized. The wedding, as joyous as it is, also symbolizes a moment of transition for both men, a move from the carefree days of their youth into the challenges of adulthood. It's clear that while their bond remains strong, there are layers of unspoken

emotions and unresolved issues that have yet to be explored. In this quiet moment, Johnno realizes that their friendship, though enduring, is not without its complications, and this unspoken tension looms over them as they step into the next phase of their lives. The conversation marks a significant, though subtle, turning point, acknowledging that their journey from childhood to adulthood is not without its challenges, but their loyalty to each other remains unwavering.



Now: The wedding night

In *The Wedding Night*, the story's tension escalates as Freddy approaches a group gathered near the marquee, his torchlight casting jittery shadows across the rain-slick ground. He urgently relays the troubling news—something has gone terribly wrong. The Gardaí (Irish police) have been called, prompted by the account of a waitress who recently regained consciousness. Her disjointed memory, though uncertain, centers on the sighting of an unidentified figure skulking in the shadows near the reception area. While her description lacks clarity, the sheer panic in her voice carries enough weight to unnerve the group. Freddy insists they take her warning seriously, the urgency in his voice cutting through the din of the storm, heightening the mystery of *The Wedding Night*.

Angus is the first to speak, his tone measured but insistent, advocating for caution and urging the others to wait for the police to arrive. He highlights the potential danger of the situation, pointing out that venturing into the darkness could lead to further complications—or worse, harm. To Angus, the idea of confronting an unknown figure without support seems reckless. However, his warnings are met with resistance. Femi, ever the skeptic, dismisses the waitress's account as unreliable, suggesting she might have been confused or hallucinating due to her condition. His nonchalant attitude is matched by Duncan, whose practicality borders on defiance. Duncan points out that given the isolated location and worsening weather, the Gardaí may take hours to arrive, leaving them with little choice but to act on their own if they wish to uncover the truth.

The debate intensifies as Angus grows increasingly exasperated by what he sees as reckless bravado. While he avoids explicitly naming his fear, the word *murder* hangs unspoken in the charged atmosphere. His reluctance to voice it outright only amplifies the unease among the group, as if saying it aloud would make the possibility

undeniable. The tension between caution and impulsivity fractures the group’s unity, with each person grappling with their own interpretation of the waitress’s warning and the rapidly deteriorating situation.

Freddy, still clutching his torch, shifts uneasily as the conversation unfolds, the flickering beam of light creating an almost surreal backdrop to their heated exchange. The storm continues to rage around them, the wind carrying fragmented echoes of their voices, which are barely audible above the rustling trees and pounding rain. Despite the disagreement, there is an unspoken acknowledgment among them that something darker may be at play. The waitress’s description of a shadowy figure, coupled with the eerie isolation of the location, evokes the sense that they are being watched, further fraying their nerves.

As the group deliberates, the tension transforms the wedding's once-festive setting into an unsettling landscape of doubt and fear. What should have been a night of celebration has become something far more ominous, steeped in mystery and distrust. Angus continues to argue for patience, urging them to consider the risks of venturing out without a clear plan or support. Yet, the pull of curiosity and the primal need to confront danger head-on weigh heavily on Femi and Duncan, both of whom seem determined to challenge the unknown.

The chapter crescendos as the group reluctantly begins to consider their next move, their indecision underscored by the oppressive darkness surrounding them. The storm’s intensity mirrors the inner turmoil of each individual, as they weigh the risks of waiting against the dangers of acting. Angus’s fear, Femi’s skepticism, and Duncan’s practicality collide in a swirling maelstrom of conflicting emotions. In this charged moment, the story captures the raw edges of human instinct when faced with the unknown—balancing the thin line between bravery and recklessness, between caution and desperation.

As the chapter closes, the group remains locked in a state of suspense, their argument unresolved, their next steps uncertain. The darkness around them feels alive, the unseen threat lurking just out of reach. In this haunting atmosphere, the reader is left

to grapple with the unsettling realization that the group may already be too late to avoid the consequences of whatever—or whoever—is out there waiting in the shadows. The story masterfully blends psychological tension with the primal fear of the unknown, setting the stage for what promises to be a gripping and unpredictable confrontation.



Earlier that day: Olivia: The Bridesmaid

Earlier that day, Olivia’s experience as a bridesmaid fills her with a growing sense of dread and discomfort. She wakes up with an oppressive headache, both a literal pain and a figurative reminder of the emotional burden she feels heading into the wedding. The thought of wearing the bridesmaid dress triggers a wave of reluctance—she dreads the very idea of embodying this role. As she struggles to get ready, a small cut on her hand causes a bloodstain to appear on the dress, an incident that triggers an unsettling memory from her past, one involving blood that is connected to an unresolved trauma she has been unable to shake off. The small act of staining her dress becomes symbolic of something deeper, a reflection of her own emotional scars that, despite her efforts, seem to resurface at the most inconvenient times.

As the day moves forward, Olivia is consumed by feelings of claustrophobia and anxiety, her discomfort deepening as the wedding preparations continue. She feels overwhelmed by the thought of interacting with so many guests, most of whom are strangers, and the pressure to fulfill her role as a bridesmaid weighs heavily on her shoulders. The idea of walking down the aisle, knowing all eyes will be on her, fills her with dread. The attention that will be focused on her during the ceremony feels suffocating, heightening her sense of being trapped in an uncomfortable position. Despite the festive atmosphere around her, Olivia finds herself shrinking inward, the noise of the event amplifying her internal turmoil. She is consumed by a growing desire to retreat from it all, to escape the overwhelming responsibility of being a part of something that doesn’t feel right to her.

In search of solace, Olivia recalls a conversation with Hannah, someone who, like her, has been somewhat marginalized from the main happenings of the wedding. Hannah’s presence offers a temporary reprieve from the whirlwind of anxiety that Olivia has been experiencing. The memory of Hannah’s calming and understanding demeanor

gives Olivia a brief sense of hope that she could find a moment of peace by confiding in her. The more Olivia thinks about it, the more the idea of sharing her burdens with Hannah seems like a relief—she imagines it might be the release she desperately needs. She resolves to seek out Hannah, convinced that a moment of genuine connection and catharsis will help to ease the heaviness she's been carrying. In this moment, Olivia feels the need to step outside of her own emotional chaos and find someone who might truly understand her.



With resolve, Olivia changes out of her bridesmaid attire into more comfortable, casual clothes, ready to leave her room and find Hannah. Her intent is clear: she wants to share her struggles, to reveal the emotional weight she's been carrying for so long. But as she nears the door to Hannah's room, her progress is suddenly interrupted by the sound of voices. She hesitates, realizing she is about to overhear an exchange between Hannah and Charlie, a figure from Olivia's past to whom she once had a juvenile crush. The conversation between Hannah and Charlie seems tense, and Olivia is struck with the overwhelming realization that she is intruding on a private moment. The sudden awareness that she is on the verge of crossing a boundary only amplifies Olivia's anxiety. She stands frozen, unsure whether to retreat or press forward, the need for connection now overshadowed by a sense of impropriety and discomfort.

This unexpected turn of events causes Olivia to withdraw, leaving her feeling even more isolated than before. Her initial intent to find solace in Hannah's company is thwarted by her own sense of embarrassment and the tension she now feels, not only in the moment but about the situation she's found herself in. Her need to unload her emotional baggage is thwarted once again, and she is left to grapple with the realization that her moment of release is slipping further from her grasp. The chapter ends with Olivia standing at a crossroads, feeling caught between her desperate desire for catharsis and the boundaries she must respect. As she faces yet another emotional setback, she is forced to reckon with the layers of tension that continue to weigh her down, leaving her at a point of reflection and uncertainty.

Now: The wedding night

The rhythmic hum of *the wedding night* reception, a symphony of laughter, music, and clinking glasses, falters as an unexpected disturbance ripples through the marquee. The waitress, no longer an unnoticed part of the evening’s meticulous choreography, now stands at the center of an unraveling moment. Her presence, trembling and visibly shaken, disrupts the illusion of seamless festivity, replacing the air of celebration with an unspoken dread. The conversations die down, leaving an eerie silence in their wake, stretching longer than anyone feels comfortable with. Her lips part slightly, but no words escape—only a series of shallow breaths and a vacant, haunted stare. Whatever she has witnessed outside has robbed her of the ability to articulate it, leaving her to stand in the dim candlelight as a mute testament to something gone terribly wrong.

A slow blink, deliberate and drawn out, is the only motion she makes, as if grounding herself back into reality. The wedding planner, who has spent the evening ensuring the event flows seamlessly, steps forward with practiced composure, though her voice betrays a subtle tremor. "What happened out there?" she asks, careful not to alarm the guests, though her own apprehension lingers just beneath the surface. She knows she needs an answer, but something inside her whispers that she may not want to hear it. The crowd leans in, curiosity mingling with a growing sense of unease, waiting for an explanation that will make sense of the fear etched across the waitress’s pale face. Even the wind outside seems to pause, the canvas of the marquee barely shifting, as if the world itself is holding its breath.

The waitress swallows hard, her throat dry, before finally managing to speak—just two words, but they land like a weight upon the gathering. "He's dead." A hushed gasp ripples through the guests, shattering the fragile calm that had momentarily settled. For a heartbeat, no one moves, as if frozen by the sheer finality of the statement.

Then, like a crack in a dam giving way, the reaction surges forth—whispers escalating into sharp, frantic murmurs. "Who?" someone demands, their voice edged with urgency, slicing through the thickening air. "Who is dead?" But the waitress, her body drained of whatever strength had carried her this far, collapses to the floor, her breathing ragged, as though she has left something vital behind in the dark from which she emerged.

The celebration, once filled with warmth and indulgence, now teeters on the edge of hysteria. The sharp contrast between the opulence of the setting—the golden glow of chandeliers, the elegantly arranged tables, the polished sheen of fine silverware—and the cold reality of death unsettles everyone. The bride and groom, once the center of attention, now seem almost irrelevant, their night stolen by something far more sinister. Eyes that once admired the delicate floral arrangements and marveled at the grandeur of the event now dart anxiously across the room, scanning for signs, searching for reassurance that no further horrors await. It is a grotesque juxtaposition: the remnants of joy clashing with the creeping dread that something far worse may be lurking just beyond the marquee’s fabric walls.

The wedding planner, acutely aware that she must maintain control, subtly signals for assistance, her mind racing through possible courses of action. But the whispers have already begun to spread, hushed yet urgent, speculation feeding upon itself as unease coils around the guests. The storm outside howls in the distance, a reminder of the island’s isolation, reinforcing the growing realization that there is nowhere to run. Within the marquee, suspicion grows like a shadow cast too long by candlelight, stretching across faces both familiar and unfamiliar. The question of who is dead is now accompanied by another, far more unsettling: how did it happen?

This was supposed to be a night of love and celebration, a moment frozen in time for all the right reasons. Instead, it has become something else entirely, something chilling and unpredictable. The wedding, with all its carefully laid plans and promises of perfection, has collapsed under the weight of a mystery that no one was prepared for. Beneath the silk-draped ceilings and sparkling décor, a dark truth has arrived

uninvited, threatening to unravel the carefully crafted illusions of unity and joy. The night is no longer a celebration of marriage—it is the beginning of a story no one wanted to tell, one that will force secrets into the light and expose the cracks beneath the polished façade.



Earlier: Will: The Groom

The storm was relentless, the wind howling through the night and tearing across the island like a wild animal. Will, referred to by all as "The Groom," made his way cautiously through the power outage, his frustration masked behind a carefully controlled facade. He held up his phone’s torch, its narrow beam barely cutting through the dense darkness, and squinted as he noticed Aoife standing a few paces away, her silhouette illuminated by brief flashes of lightning. She motioned for him to follow, her expression unreadable, and for a moment, Will hesitated, an unspoken tension tightening in his chest.

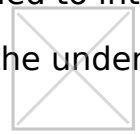
Aoife claimed she needed help with the generator, her tone calm and businesslike. Yet there was something unsettling in the way she moved, in the way her gaze lingered on him a second too long. The wind whipped around them, pulling at Will’s jacket and ruffling his hair—a detail that irked him more than he cared to admit—but he followed her into the storm, determined to preserve the image of himself as the composed and capable figure he had so meticulously crafted.

As they walked, the night seemed to press in closer, the island shrouded in an oppressive darkness that mirrored the unease growing within him. When they reached the generator’s location, Aoife turned to face him, her demeanor shifting from polite professionalism to something colder, more deliberate. Her first words struck him like a sudden blow—not about the generator, but about the past, about Darcey, a boy whose name Will had buried deep in his memory.

At first, Will tried to dismiss her accusations, his voice steady, his responses calculated to deflect blame. But Aoife would not relent, her words cutting through his defenses with precision, laying bare a truth he had spent years avoiding. She revealed her connection to Darcey, her grief sharpened into something resolute, her determination

to confront Will fueled by years of unanswered questions and unacknowledged pain.

The storm intensified around them, the wind and rain a chaotic symphony that only heightened the gravity of the moment. Aoife's accusations pierced through the noise, her voice unwavering as she recounted the torment Darcey had endured—the relentless bullying, the betrayal, and the ultimate tragedy that had left his family shattered. Will tried to interject, to explain, but his words faltered under the weight of her resolve and the undeniable truth she had brought to light.



Aoife's planning had been meticulous. She had used Will's fame, his arrogance, and his belief in his untouchable image to lure him here. The storm, the power outage, the isolation of the island—it was all part of her plan, a stage set for this reckoning. The bog beneath them served as a silent witness to their confrontation, its murky depths holding secrets that refused to be forgotten, just as Darcey's memory lingered in Aoife's mind, unyielding and unforgiving.

For Will, the confrontation was more than a moment of discomfort; it was a crack in the carefully constructed image he had presented to the world. The persona he had built through his fame, particularly on his survival show *Survive the Night*, was unraveling before Aoife's piercing gaze. She spoke not just of Darcey but of Will's complicity, of how he and Jonathan Briggs had treated Darcey with cruelty and indifference, actions that had contributed to his tragic fate.

As the rain lashed against them, Will felt a rare and unfamiliar sensation—fear. Not just the fear of being exposed, but a deeper fear that came from realizing he could no longer control the narrative of his past. Aoife was unrelenting, her grief and anger cutting through the storm like a blade, leaving him with nowhere to hide.

The setting could not have been more symbolic. The bog, dark and unforgiving, was a reminder of the weight of the choices Will had made and the lives that had been altered because of them. It was a place where secrets sank and stayed, yet tonight, Aoife had brought those secrets to the surface, refusing to let them remain buried.

Will stood frozen, torn between denial and the crushing realization that his actions had led him to this moment. The storm outside was nothing compared to the storm within him, as guilt, fear, and the consequences of his past collided. Aoife’s words echoed in his mind, leaving him with a truth he could no longer ignore—some shadows cannot be outrun, and some debts cannot go unpaid.

As Aoife stepped closer, her final words were not a demand for vengeance but a call for acknowledgment, for the truth to finally be spoken. Will, for the first time, was left without a retort, without the armor of his charisma and carefully curated image. The storm would eventually pass, the power would return, but the darkness of this moment would remain with him, an unshakable reminder that the past has a way of demanding justice, no matter how deeply it is buried.

And as he stood there, drenched and shaken, staring into the unrelenting gaze of a woman driven by grief and truth, he understood one thing with startling clarity—this confrontation was not just about Darcey. It was about him, about the person he had been, the choices he had made, and the reckoning he could no longer avoid.

Johnno: The Best Man

In the chapter titled "The Best Man" from *JOHNNO*, the protagonist, Johnno, is thrust into a day filled with uncomfortable reminders of his past. The setting is Will’s wedding, an event that should be joyous, but for Johnno, it becomes a mirror reflecting everything he feels insecure about. Surrounded by Will’s successful school friends, Johnno is confronted with a deep sense of inadequacy. The high achievements of his peers stand in sharp contrast to his own life, which feels stagnant by comparison. This constant comparison forces him to revisit old wounds—specifically, the memories of his past mistakes, including the bullying of a younger student, a moment that continues to haunt him and chip away at his self-esteem.

As the wedding reception proceeds, Johnno's discomfort only deepens. In an attempt to find some way to gain approval and perhaps redeem himself in the eyes of his peers, he boasts about his recent venture into the whisky business. He hopes this will be his opportunity to impress others and prove that he has accomplished something of significance. However, his efforts fall flat. His words seem to hang in the air with no real impact, as conversations quickly shift to other topics, leaving him feeling dismissed and overlooked. This rejection from his old friends stings, reinforcing his sense of alienation and isolation. Worse still, when Johnno is confronted with critical remarks from Mr. Slater, Will’s father, and the headmaster of their old school, Trevellyan’s, his feelings of worthlessness are compounded. Their disdainful comments act as a brutal reminder of his perceived failure, not just in his career but in his life’s trajectory.

A brief flicker of hope arises when Piers, a producer from the reality show *Survive the Night*, arrives at the wedding. Johnno views this as a golden opportunity to prove to everyone, especially those who have doubted him, that he is capable of achieving success. He imagines that this is his moment to shine, a chance to finally show that he

is not the failure he sometimes feels he is. However, the reality is much harsher than he anticipated. When he remembers how his idea for the show—an idea he had pitched with great enthusiasm—was dismissed and ignored, his excitement deflates. This forgotten opportunity weighs heavily on him, intensifying his internal struggle. His hopes of turning things around, of proving his worth to the world and to those closest to him, seem to slip further out of reach.

Johnno’s journey in this chapter is defined by his internal conflict, which is skillfully portrayed through his interactions with others at the wedding. On the surface, he strives to maintain a façade of ease and indifference, but the truth is that he is deeply troubled by his lack of achievement. His attempts to prove himself only underscore the gap between how he wishes to be seen and how he actually feels about himself. This creates a dynamic tension throughout the chapter, as Johnno is torn between the desire for validation and the overwhelming weight of his past actions. The wedding, instead of serving as a joyful occasion, becomes a catalyst for reflection—a lens through which Johnno is forced to confront his past mistakes and current feelings of failure.

The wedding reception, with its swirl of laughter and celebration, becomes a space where Johnno’s unresolved emotions come to the surface. The guilt from his school days, the desire to show off his perceived successes, and the persistent yearning for acceptance all collide. Despite his outward efforts to remain composed, Johnno cannot help but feel like an outsider. His interactions with his old friends, their dismissive attitudes, and the criticisms from authority figures like Mr. Slater only deepen his sense of alienation. This chapter paints a poignant picture of how Johnno’s past, with its regrets and insecurities, continues to hold sway over his present.

The deeper layers of Johnno’s character are revealed as he navigates the emotional minefield of the wedding reception. Beneath the surface of a man who appears to be indifferent to the world around him lies a person desperately seeking redemption. He longs for approval, but more importantly, he yearns to find peace within himself. His journey through the wedding day showcases his struggle to reconcile his past with his

current desires for success and acceptance. Through Johnno’s eyes, readers see the profound impact that unresolved guilt and internal conflict can have on one’s sense of self-worth, and how, despite our best efforts, our past often shapes who we become in the present.

Ultimately, Johnno’s story is a powerful exploration of the complexities of self-identity, the longing for validation, and the painful process of facing one’s mistakes. His feelings of inadequacy are not just born of comparison but are deeply tied to his inability to forgive himself for his past actions. As the chapter progresses, Johnno’s vulnerabilities are laid bare, making him a character that readers can relate to on a deeply human level. His desire for redemption and the internal battle he faces throughout the wedding reception create a poignant narrative that touches on universal themes of forgiveness, personal growth, and the ongoing journey toward self-acceptance.

The wedding day: Hannah: The Plus-One

In the chapter "The Plus-One," Hannah wakes up with a painful hangover, her head still foggy from the previous night's festivities. As she reflects on the events, she becomes acutely aware of the growing distance between herself and Charlie, her partner. She can't help but remember the intense gaze of Will and the enigmatic conversation she had with Olivia, which stirs something deep within her, pushing her to question her sexual desires and her relationship dynamics. Seeking intimacy with Charlie, she is met with indifference, leaving her feeling rejected and turning her thoughts toward the romantic tensions that seem to swirl around the island, particularly between Will, Jules, and others. This realization forces her to confront the subtle undercurrents of unspoken emotions that have been building since her arrival.

Despite her discomfort and the feeling of estrangement from Charlie, Hannah is inexplicably drawn to the intriguing people she has met on the island. She decides to take a solitary walk early in the morning, desperate for a break from the stifling emotions she is grappling with. As she walks through the tranquil yet eerily quiet landscape, she explores the Folly and surrounding island, the early dawn casting a peaceful, almost haunting atmosphere. During her walk, she encounters Aoife, the efficient and captivating housekeeper, who directs her to a safe route. Aoife’s kindness momentarily lifts her spirits, but as she walks further, Hannah feels a pang of guilt for having temporarily forgotten about her children amid the distractions of the island and its enchanting setting. Her feelings of neglect and her yearning for adventure become tangled, leading her into a deeper state of reflection about what she truly desires from life.

Hannah’s journey takes her past the wedding marquee, and as she ventures closer to a graveyard, her thoughts grow heavier, contemplating the fleeting nature of life. The sight of a child’s grave, marked by the harsh reality of a life lost to the sea, triggers a

profound introspection about mortality and the transient moments that define human existence. As she stands there, lost in thought, her phone rings, pulling her back to reality—it's her children, and their call ignites a deep, primal love that momentarily dissolves her feelings of detachment. This moment of connection with her family contrasts sharply with the growing disillusionment she feels with her surroundings and the complex relationships around her. It's a poignant reminder of what truly matters in her life, but it also underscores the emotional conflict she is facing as she navigates the island's mysteries.

The chapter takes a dramatic turn when Hannah, while exploring the bog, begins to sink deeper into the mire. What begins as a simple walk, an escape from the emotional turmoil she's been experiencing, quickly becomes a fight for survival. The bog, dark and treacherous, serves as a metaphor for her sinking relationship and existential angst, trapping her in a physical and emotional struggle. Her cries for help are swallowed by the wind, a reflection of how her voice and emotions have gone unnoticed for so long. Finally, Duncan and Pete, two ushers, hear her desperate cries and manage to pull her out of the bog, saving her from further peril. However, the rescue does little to quell the vulnerability that Hannah now feels, both physically exposed and emotionally stripped bare. This harrowing experience leaves her more aware of her own fragility and the tension that simmers within her, magnifying her growing sense of isolation.

The chapter intricately weaves together themes of love, loss, and the search for meaning amidst the complexities of human relationships. The wedding weekend, meant to be a celebration of love, becomes the backdrop for Hannah's internal journey—one that is fraught with emotional unrest, existential questions, and the constant struggle to reconcile her desires with the reality around her. Through her experiences on the island, the reader witnesses Hannah's confrontation with both her past and the uncertain future she faces, as the mystery of the wedding weekend intertwines with her own personal quest for meaning and connection.

Now: The wedding night

The wedding night is often surrounded by a sense of mystery and anticipation, but in this haunting landscape, it mirrors a darker reality. As the group traverses the bog, they discover a lifeless body half-submerged, claimed by the earth’s persistent grasp. The bog, with its dark history of consuming the dead, seems to silently welcome its newest victim, adding to the growing list of those swallowed by its depths. The ground beneath them feels not just like earth but a cemetery, one that holds secrets of countless forgotten souls. As the group draws near, led by the ushers, the realization settles in: the bog has a chilling way of keeping its grim history alive, drawing the dead into its fold while the living are left to confront the horrifying truths it hides.

When the body finally comes into view under the sharp beam of their flashlights, it is a grotesque sight. The body lies sprawled awkwardly, legs askew, the head turned at an unnatural angle, with lifeless eyes staring blankly into the darkness. The partially exposed tongue from the open mouth adds a disturbing touch, emphasizing the violence of the death. A dark, spreading stain on the chest signals the brutal cause of death, a grim reminder that this person’s life was taken violently and abruptly, forever altering the course of what should have been a peaceful existence.

The group’s shock is palpable when Femi calls out the name "Will" in disbelief, bringing the tragic reality into sharper focus. The man once celebrated as the groom, full of joy and anticipation, is now reduced to an image of suffering, his face contorted in agony and his body a silent testament to the violence that ended his life. The once-celebrated man is now just another victim, stripped of everything that once made him a symbol of happiness. His transformation, from a figure of celebration to one of sorrow, stuns his friends, and the truth hits them with devastating force—Will is no longer among them, and nothing can reverse the damage done.

Angus, usually the composed one, is physically overcome, his hands trembling as he stares at Will’s body, unable to comprehend the tragedy that has just unfolded. Duncan, who had always kept his emotions in check, is reduced to tears, his hands gripping Will's body in a desperate attempt to make the reality of the situation disappear. His frantic attempts to revive Will, shaking him with desperate pleas, speak to the deep denial and sorrow that has gripped him. Despite knowing that death has already claimed Will, Duncan clings to the hope that there might be a chance, that somehow the body could be brought back to life, reflecting the universal human desire to deny the finality of death.

The bog, in its relentless indifference, continues to claim Will’s body, pulling him deeper into its damp, suffocating embrace. While the living grieve, the earth remains unmoved, showing no sympathy for their sorrow. The bog’s ceaseless work underscores the unavoidable truth of death, indifferent to the cries of the living or the agony they feel. It serves as a silent witness to the loss, a reminder that death waits for no one and can claim any life at any time, regardless of the love or the grief left behind.

As the group stands in stunned silence, the realization settles in: Will’s life is over, and they are left to face the consequences of what has occurred. The sight of his body serves as a grim marker of how fragile life is, how quickly things can shift from joy to tragedy. What began as a celebration has now become a nightmare, one that will haunt them for years to come. The bog, in its quiet and consuming nature, takes the final claim on Will’s body, reminding the living that no one escapes the inevitable pull of death. The tragic scene etched in their memories serves as an eternal reminder that life is fragile, and death can come without warning, changing everything in an instant.

Aoife: The Wedding Planner

The Wedding Planner is not just about orchestrating celebrations—it’s about weaving stories of love, loss, and destiny. As the sun dips lower in the sky, casting elongated shadows over the rugged terrain, Aoife takes a brief respite from her responsibilities to visit the island's graveyard. This small, weathered resting place, surrounded by gnarled trees and eroded headstones, holds generations of Connemara’s dead, their names fading beneath the relentless wind and salt air. The proximity of the burial ground to the Folly is not by design but by necessity—on an island with such limited dry land, the living and the dead are destined to share close quarters. As Aoife meanders through the uneven rows of graves, her thoughts drift to her own past, to the people she has lost and the weight of history she carries with her. The stillness of the place is deceptive, its quiet disturbed only by the distant crash of waves and the sharp cry of seabirds overhead. A solitary cormorant perches atop the ruined chapel, its black feathers slick against the evening light, and Aoife stiffens instinctively, as if a chapter from the wedding planner were unfolding right before her eyes.

The sight of the bird, known in local folklore as the "devil’s bird," sends an unexpected chill through her, stirring something ancient and uneasy in her gut. In Connemara’s oral traditions, cormorants are harbingers of misfortune, their presence often associated with death and bad omens. Though she tells herself it is nothing more than superstition, the weight of such beliefs lingers, much like the presence of the dead beneath her feet. She remembers childhood stories of sailors lost at sea, their souls carried on the backs of these birds, forever circling between worlds. A part of her wants to dismiss these thoughts as mere relics of an old, vanishing world, but standing there among the gravestones, with the bird’s beady eyes fixed on her, the unease refuses to leave. Shaking off the moment’s superstitious hold, she turns away, focusing instead on the path back to the Folly, where life—messy, chaotic, and ever-demanding—waits for her return.

Upon arriving, Aoife swiftly reintegrates herself into the controlled mayhem of wedding preparations, her mind shifting from the weight of history to the intricacies of the present. The reception space hums with activity—florists adjusting centerpieces, staff setting out glasses that catch the warm glow of flickering candlelight, and murmurs of final seating arrangements filtering through the air. Yet, amidst the orchestrated perfection, a moment catches her off guard—an encounter between the bride and Charlie, a man whose presence seems to shift the air between them. Their hushed conversation, tinged with an intimacy that suggests something unspoken, disrupts the polished façade of the wedding’s picture-perfect narrative. Though their words are lost to distance, the body language speaks volumes, revealing a tension that doesn't belong to a mere casual acquaintance. Aoife has spent enough years in this profession to recognize the delicate cracks beneath a polished exterior, the quiet fissures that threaten to widen when no one is looking.

As she moves past them, she does not linger, though a part of her tucks away the observation as another small, unnoticed detail in the grander scheme of the night. Weddings, despite their careful choreography, have a way of unearthing what people work hard to keep buried—old loves, lingering regrets, the delicate fault lines between what is and what could have been. This place, this island with its history of the living and the dead pressed so closely together, seems to magnify those truths. Even as Aoife throws herself back into her work, ensuring that every detail of the evening remains flawless, she cannot shake the sense that something—whether bound by superstition, memory, or the quiet unraveling of hidden tensions—is stirring beneath the surface. The past is never quite past, and on an island steeped in ghosts, both real and imagined, the line between the two is often thinner than anyone cares to admit.

Several hours earlier: Hannah: The Plus-One

Hannah allows herself to be swept up in the rhythm of the music, moving freely across the dance floor with Luis, a confident and talented dancer who effortlessly matches her energy. The band has electrified the atmosphere, filling the room with an intoxicating vibrancy that makes it easy to forget the weight of the day's events. For the first time in what feels like ages, she surrenders to the moment, letting the beat guide her and allowing herself to enjoy the thrill of uninhibited movement. The stress and loneliness that had gnawed at her earlier, fueled largely by Charlie’s dismissive behavior, begin to dissolve into the background. Each step, each turn, becomes an act of defiance against the emotions that had threatened to drag her down. The world outside the dance floor ceases to exist, and for now, all that matters is the warmth of the music, the closeness of another human being, and the temporary illusion that she is unburdened by the past.

As the music intensifies, so does the proximity between Hannah and Luis, their movements naturally pulling them closer with an unspoken chemistry. There is a brief moment where their eyes meet, a silent acknowledgment of the growing tension, and Hannah suddenly feels the need to step away before she loses herself in something she might regret. Searching for a reason to distance herself, she suggests getting a drink, needing a reprieve from the dizzying mix of emotions surging through her. Luis, however, interprets this as an invitation rather than a retreat, following her without hesitation, his easy charm making it difficult to refuse his presence. The cool air near the bar provides some relief, and as she exhales, trying to regain her composure, they are greeted by Luis’s friend, Jethro. He introduces himself casually, making a remark about how Luis had noticed Hannah earlier in the night, a comment meant to be playful but which stirs an unexpected reaction within her.

The mention of Luis’s interest momentarily distracts Hannah, making her acutely aware of how much she craves being noticed, even if she simultaneously struggles with the idea of letting someone in. The conversation quickly shifts as Jethro and Luis reminisce about their university days, their camaraderie strengthened by shared experiences in rugby and late-night adventures. The mention of university brings a wave of nostalgia crashing over Hannah, momentarily forcing her to reflect on her own past, the choices she has made, and the moments that have led her to this very night. She pushes the thought aside, unwilling to let memories pull her away from the present, from the fleeting escape she so desperately wants to hold onto. Fueled by a sudden impulse, she orders tequila shots, something she normally wouldn’t do, driven by a reckless need to drown out her thoughts. Luis and Jethro follow her lead, raising their glasses in a spontaneous toast, their laughter a stark contrast to the quiet turmoil brewing within Hannah.

The tequila burns as it slides down her throat, but instead of discomfort, she welcomes the warmth, the distraction, the false sense of invincibility that alcohol often provides. The moment is light, easy, filled with shared laughter and playful banter, allowing her to momentarily detach from the weight pressing against her chest. However, when Jethro casually mentions Edinburgh, a cold wave of reality settles over her, dragging her back to the reasons she is here in the first place. The name of the city is a sharp reminder of everything she has been trying to suppress, a painful contrast to the carefree atmosphere surrounding her. For a fleeting second, her resolve wavers, but she quickly forces a smile, unwilling to let the past steal this moment of escape. She takes another shot, hoping that if she drinks enough, she can blur the lines between past and present, between regret and temporary happiness.

Despite her best efforts, Hannah cannot completely escape the emotions tangled within her. The dance, the music, the alcohol—all of it serves as a momentary reprieve, but deep down, she knows that the weight she carries cannot be lifted so easily. The presence of Luis and Jethro provides a comforting distraction, but it does not erase the lingering thoughts of Charlie, the way his actions had affected her, the way they still had power over her even now. As she moves through the night,

oscillating between moments of laughter and brief flashes of self-doubt, she realizes that no matter how hard she tries to lose herself in the revelry, some wounds cannot be ignored. The escape she seeks is fleeting, the sense of freedom only temporary, as reality waits patiently at the edges of her consciousness, ready to pull her back in the moment she lets her guard down.



Jules: The Bride

Jules, the bride, stands at the precipice of one of the most significant moments of her life, adorned in a wedding gown that reflects both her elegance and the deeper connection she has to her heritage. The delicate gold crown perched on her head is more than just an accessory; it is a nod to Irish folklore, weaving a layer of tradition into the sophisticated celebration unfolding before her. As she clutches her bouquet, made up of wildflowers native to the region, she is aware of the symbolic weight these elements carry—each detail connects her to the land, the people, and the customs that have shaped her life. Despite the beauty of the moment, Jules feels an underlying tension, the nerves of a bride who is about to make a commitment that feels both exhilarating and terrifying. As she walks toward her father, the man who will lead her down the aisle, she struggles with the paradox of tradition and her personal reservations. Her father’s own troubled marital history, full of disappointments and regrets, hangs heavily on Jules’s mind, yet she pushes forward, compelled by her desire to honor the expectations placed upon her.

In the brief moments before she enters the ceremony, Jules takes the opportunity to engage her father in a conversation that veers into the delicate subject of Will, her fiancé. Her voice falters slightly as she seeks his approval, eager to understand where he stands regarding her choice of life partner. Her father’s response is less than reassuring, offering nothing more than polite, general remarks that fail to address her deeper, more personal concerns. The lack of a direct endorsement from her father causes a ripple of doubt to surge within her, adding to her already tumultuous feelings about the wedding. This moment reveals a deeper layer of Jules’s emotional landscape—her longing for validation, both from her father and from the life she is about to begin with Will. As she processes her father’s evasiveness, Jules experiences a wave of frustration, culminating in a private, almost impulsive act of destruction. She

slams the vase holding her bouquet to the ground, watching the shards scatter, as if to release the built-up tension in her body and mind. This act of catharsis, though small and seemingly insignificant, grants her a brief respite, allowing her to regain control over her emotions before rejoining her father and proceeding down the aisle.

The transition from the inner turmoil of her pre-ceremony reflection to the public walk down the aisle is stark. As Jules steps forward, the guests' faces blur into anonymity, their expressions no longer a source of comfort but of expectation. The wind picks up, swirling the air around her, adding a layer of dissonance to the sacredness of the moment. The haunting melody of the singers seems to echo her inner conflict, pulling her attention away from the event and back to the unresolved feelings swirling in her heart. It is in these moments of isolation, as she walks towards the altar, that Jules feels an almost visceral sense of alienation. The ceremony, which should be a moment of clarity and union, becomes a stage for her uncertainty, making her question her place in the crowd, her relationship with Will, and even her relationship with herself. The brief but powerful sense of estrangement is compounded by the weight of her earlier conversation with her father, leaving her feeling disconnected from the very people she should be closest to on this day. But as she takes another step forward, the faces of her friends and family begin to emerge from the blur, their smiles a reminder of the love and support they offer. These familiar faces, filled with warmth and encouragement, help her shed the heavy feelings of doubt and alienation, allowing her to regain her composure.

Jules's walk down the aisle ultimately becomes a transformative experience, a mixture of tension, release, and realization. Despite the emotional turbulence of the moments before, she begins to feel the weight of her decision lighten as she steps closer to the altar. The discomfort she initially felt, compounded by the pressure of her father's indifference and the doubts swirling in her mind, gives way to a sense of clarity. By the time she reaches Will, the intensity of the emotions that once threatened to overwhelm her begins to shift, and she finds herself standing on the precipice of a new chapter. This pivotal moment in her life is not just about walking down the aisle; it's about acknowledging the complex web of family dynamics, personal aspirations, and

deep-seated fears that have shaped her path up until now. As she steps forward to meet Will, Jules embraces the uncertainty that still lingers, knowing that the journey ahead, with its own set of challenges and triumphs, is just beginning. The walk down the aisle, then, becomes a powerful metaphor for the transition she is making—not just into marriage, but into a deeper understanding of herself and the life she wants to build.



Now: Johnno: The Best Man

In *The Best Man*, the protagonist finds himself entangled in a horrifying moment that he cannot escape, a reality that unfolds too quickly for him to control. He kneels beside Will, his hands slick with blood, his breath shallow as he realizes the terrible mistake he has just made—pulling the knife from his friend's chest, thinking for one brief, desperate moment that it might save him. The surrounding darkness seems to close in, pressing against him as he struggles to process what has just happened, but before he can react, the sounds of hurried footsteps and sharp voices cut through the night.

Femi, Angus, and Duncan burst into the scene, their torches flashing wildly as they take in the sight before them—Will collapsed, the knife in the protagonist's trembling hands, the stark image of a crime frozen in time. The panic in their eyes turns to something darker, something accusatory, and their voices rise in demand. *Drop the knife. Step away.* But he cannot move, cannot speak, cannot convince them that this moment is not what it seems.

The protagonist wants to explain, to tell them that he had only arrived seconds before, that he had tried to help, that pulling the knife free had been instinct, not violence. But their faces are filled with suspicion, their movements sharp and aggressive as they advance toward him. In their eyes, he is not a friend who has lost someone—he is a man caught in the act, guilty before he even has the chance to defend himself.

The weight of what has happened bears down on him, and his mind races, trying to make sense of how he got here. He remembers the storm, the thick fog of confusion that had clouded his thoughts after Pete Ramsay handed him something to take, something that left his senses dulled. He had stumbled through the night, the world swaying beneath him, and then—blackness. A blackout he cannot account for, a lapse

in time that now terrifies him, because what if he did more than he remembers?

And then there was Will. Finding him had been a shock, a moment so unreal that it had taken him several breaths to even process what he was seeing. The knife in his chest. The labored breathing. The fear in Will’s eyes as he looked up at him, as if he, too, had questions he would never get the chance to ask.

The emotions that flood him now are unbearable, a mix of grief, guilt, and something else—love, raw and unspoken, a truth he had only fully realized when it was too late. He had held Will in those final moments, clinging to him as if it might somehow reverse what had already been set in motion. And now, as the others force him to the ground, restraining him like a criminal, that love becomes something weaponized against him—a reason they will never believe his innocence.

The ushers hold him down, their hands firm and unrelenting, their words lost in the overwhelming sound of his own thoughts. He is no longer a friend to them, no longer someone they know; he is a man they fear, someone they have already convicted in their minds. The fight drains from him as the Gardaí arrive, their uniforms stark against the chaotic backdrop of flashing lights and whispering voices, sealing his fate before he has a chance to reclaim it.

He realizes now, with a clarity that stings, that he has always been on the outside of this group, never fully accepted in the way he had wanted. He had been tolerated, yes, but never truly trusted, and now, when he needs them most, that distance becomes an impenetrable wall. No one will listen. No one will wait for his explanation. He is alone in his grief, alone in his truth, and the weight of that loneliness is more crushing than the accusations themselves.

The opening chapter paints a chilling portrait of misunderstanding, loss, and the irreversible consequences of a single moment. It immerses the reader in a world where fear speaks louder than reason, where trust is fragile and fleeting, where love—however real—is not enough to save him. As the protagonist is taken away, his future uncertain, the reader is left to question not only the events of that night but also

whether he will ever find a way to prove the truth when the world has already decided his guilt.



Now: The wedding night

The wedding night is drenched in an almost suffocating darkness as the group stumbles forward, their every step marked by an overwhelming sense of unease. The absence of Pete weighs heavily on their minds, his sudden disappearance shifting the atmosphere from tense anticipation to outright dread. Each member of the group feels the unseen force of the night pressing down on them, amplifying every rustle in the trees and every snap of a twig. The oppressive blackness seems to stretch endlessly, swallowing their surroundings and leaving them to feel as though they are suspended in a void. Each step they take is cautious, deliberate, their feet brushing against hidden roots and uneven stones that threaten to trip them. The terrain is unforgiving, and every stumble deepens the feeling that the ground itself is working against them, as though nature conspires to keep them lost in this inescapable abyss—an eerie contrast to the joy and celebration that had filled the air just hours before on the wedding night.

Despite their fear, they cling to each other in the only way they can—through their voices. Their occasional shouts to check on one another, though trembling with uncertainty, act as the sole threads binding them together. These fleeting connections momentarily pierce through the overwhelming silence, offering tiny glimpses of reassurance in a world that now feels alien and hostile. Yet even these exchanges are tinged with the gnawing suspicion that something, unseen and malevolent, is observing their every move. They feel the weight of invisible eyes following them, tracking their movements like a predator stalking its prey. Each shift in the shadows, each inexplicable sound, forces them to huddle closer, their fear growing as their imagination begins to fill the gaps left by the unknown.

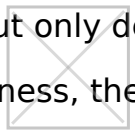
The breaking point comes when Femi, overwhelmed by the crushing tension, raises his torch in a frantic motion to illuminate what he believes to be a looming figure. The

beam of light reveals a graveyard, its ancient Celtic crosses standing as silent witnesses to their panic. The sight is jarring—both a relief and a fresh source of unease. Though no threatening figure emerges, the graveyard itself feels like an ominous presence, its weathered stones and crumbling statues emanating a quiet but persistent sense of foreboding. The eerie stillness of the graves is unnerving, as if the dead themselves are aware of the living intruding upon their territory. For a moment, the group hesitates, uncertain whether to feel gratitude for finding no immediate danger or dread at the symbolism of their discovery. The graveyard, with its decaying headstones and silent history, reminds them of their own fragility, of how easily the living can be swallowed by the unknown.

The weight of exhaustion begins to settle over the group as they debate their next steps. Some suggest pausing to regroup, while others argue that lingering near the graves feels like tempting fate. The oppressive silence returns, broken only by the sound of their shallow breaths and the occasional shuffle of their feet. The air feels heavier, almost suffocating, as if the very night itself is pressing down on them, urging them to keep moving despite their fatigue. Each of them wrestles with their own fears, silently wondering if Pete’s disappearance is an isolated event or a sign of what is to come. The tension is palpable, their imaginations spiraling into darker territories with every passing second. Even as they push forward, the graveyard remains imprinted in their minds, a haunting reminder of how close death feels in this moment.

As they trudge on, the line between reality and paranoia begins to blur. Every flicker of movement in the shadows, every faint sound carried by the wind, feels like a threat. Their fear is no longer just about the darkness—it’s about what the darkness hides, what could be lurking just out of sight, waiting for the right moment to strike. The group’s reliance on each other grows, their shared fear forging a bond that feels as fragile as it is vital. Each whispered reassurance, each glance exchanged in the dim torchlight, becomes a lifeline, reminding them that they are not alone in this nightmare. Yet, despite their unity, the question lingers unspoken among them: if Pete could vanish so suddenly, what’s to stop the same fate from befalling the rest of them?

The night stretches on endlessly, each step forward feeling like an act of defiance against the unknown. Their journey becomes less about reaching safety and more about surviving the night, battling not only the physical challenges of the terrain but the mental toll of their own escalating fear. The graveyard, the darkness, and Pete’s absence create a perfect storm of anxiety that threatens to consume them. Each member of the group carries the silent understanding that the answers they seek may not bring relief but only deepen the terror they feel. As they continue through the suffocating blackness, the only certainty they have is that this night will not let them escape unscathed, and whatever awaits them in the shadows may change them forever.



Olivia: The Bridesmaid

Olivia stands at a crossroads, her heart burdened with the impossible decision of whether to confess the truth about her secret relationship with Will and risk shattering Jules's wedding day. Encouraged by a friend's belief that honesty brings peace, she initially steels herself for the confrontation, believing that revealing the affair is the only way to truly protect her sister. However, Will, ever the master manipulator, quickly dismantles her resolve, painting himself as the victim of circumstance while simultaneously making her feel like the villain. He insists that Jules would never forgive her, that she would be the one blamed for ruining what was meant to be the happiest day of her sister's life. His words cut deep, fueling Olivia's existing insecurities and reinforcing the idea that exposing the affair will cause more harm than good. Torn between her moral duty to tell Jules the truth and the fear of fracturing their already fragile relationship, Olivia finds herself paralyzed, unable to move forward with her confession.

As her internal conflict deepens, Olivia's desperation leads her to a different approach—anonymously warning Jules in a last-ditch attempt to ease her conscience without directly facing the fallout. However, even this effort reflects her inability to stand firmly in her convictions, revealing the long-standing pattern of her reluctance to assert herself in the face of stronger personalities. Unlike Jules, who has always exuded confidence and control, Olivia has often been the quiet observer, the one who allows others to dictate the course of events around her. She recognizes this about herself, and the realization stings, especially as she watches Will seize control of the situation with ease. Her decision to gather evidence of their affair as a means of holding him accountable is quickly met with swift retaliation. In a single calculated move, Will takes her phone—her only proof of their relationship—and hurls it into the water, effectively silencing any chance she had of exposing him. The action is both

literal and symbolic, representing how effortlessly Will can erase the truth and manipulate reality to serve his own interests.

Will’s cruelty does not end with the destruction of evidence; instead, he tightens his grip on Olivia’s silence with an even darker threat. Producing compromising photos of her, he makes it clear that any attempt to expose him will result in her own humiliation. The power dynamic between them is stark—Olivia, despite her best efforts, remains trapped, a pawn in Will’s carefully crafted narrative. The weight of his threat settles over her like a suffocating blanket, leaving her frozen with fear. She is no longer just battling the moral dilemma of whether to tell Jules the truth; she is now fighting for her own dignity, her own safety. Will has made it clear that any misstep on her part will come at a cost, forcing her to reckon with the painful reality of his true nature. In that moment, Olivia finally sees Will for who he truly is—not just an unfaithful man, but a ruthless manipulator willing to destroy anyone who threatens his carefully constructed image.

As the night unfolds, Olivia is left to drown in the consequences of her silence, her guilt growing heavier with each passing moment. The wedding continues around her, a grand performance of love and celebration, but to her, every vow, every toast, every carefully curated smile feels like a cruel facade. The weight of the unspoken truth presses down on her, making it difficult to breathe, difficult to exist in a space where everything feels like a lie. She watches Jules, her sister glowing with happiness, unaware of the deception lurking beneath the surface. It should be a moment of pure joy, yet all Olivia can feel is the crushing guilt of knowing that Jules is stepping into a marriage built on betrayal. She wonders if she will ever be able to forgive herself for staying silent, for allowing Will to win yet again.

The conflict within Olivia is more than just about right and wrong—it is about power, manipulation, and the impossible choices that come with loving someone enough to want to protect them from the truth. Every instinct in her screams that she should have done more, should have fought harder, but fear keeps her shackled in place. The night, once filled with promise, now carries the weight of secrets that will not simply

disappear with time. Even if Olivia chooses to remain silent for now, she knows the truth will never truly be buried. The question is not if Jules will eventually discover Will’s deception, but when—and whether, when that time comes, Olivia will regret not having been the one to tell her first. As she watches Jules dance with Will, laughing, oblivious to the truth, Olivia is left with the agonizing certainty that some betrayals, no matter how well hidden, always find their way to the surface.



Johnno: The Best Man

The Best Man retreats to his room, attempting to unwind with a small stash of marijuana purchased in Dublin's famed Temple Bar district. The crowded, tourist-heavy area had provided a quick solution, though he knew the quality of the weed wouldn't match his usual supply back home. Still, he hopes it will grant him the peace of mind he so desperately seeks. The crashing waves outside form a rhythmic soundtrack, their unrelenting force mirroring his restless thoughts. The island's rugged isolation serves as an unwelcome reminder of Trevellyan's, the boarding school where he spent his formative years. The parallels are unavoidable—both settings encircled by unyielding waters, both places steeped in a mix of beauty and unease. The waves become a trigger, pulling him back to a dormitory where barred windows framed his view of the world, leaving him to question whether they were there for protection or to prevent escape. In this moment, the sounds of the sea are no longer calming; they are a portal to memories he has struggled to forget.

For years, he has avoided revisiting his time at Trevellyan's, knowing that the experiences there are too heavy to carry into his present life. Yet, something about this island refuses to let those memories lie dormant. The atmosphere seems to crack open the carefully constructed walls in his mind, allowing suppressed emotions to flood back in. Despite the alcohol he has consumed throughout the evening and the weed he now smokes, which would normally leave him sedated, he finds no relief. Instead, his body is overtaken by an unbearable restlessness. His skin crawls as if insects are skittering across it, though he knows it is only his imagination manifesting the unease bubbling inside him. Sleep, once a reliable refuge, now feels like a threat. It isn't the discomfort of the bed or the lingering effects of the substances he's consumed—it's the fear of what awaits him in his dreams. After years of blissful ignorance, the nightmares have returned, vivid and merciless, dragging him back into the shadows of

his adolescence.

The root of his unease is not just the isolation of the island, nor the psychological effects of the substances coursing through his system. It lies deeper, tied to the presence of certain people he is now forced to face and the unresolved secrets they share. This trip, which should have been a celebration, has instead unearthed a part of himself he thought he had buried for good. The island feels alive, its air thick with the weight of unspoken truths, its crashing waves like a relentless reminder of what he's been avoiding. He knows he cannot blame the setting entirely; the past has been knocking at the door for years, and this place, this moment, has simply flung it wide open. It isn't just the physical similarities to Trevellyan's that are haunting him—it's the memories of nights spent in silence, hiding truths he was sworn to keep, and the realization that those truths are still clawing at him, refusing to be forgotten.

As he stares at the ceiling, his mind races, circling the same memories and questions over and over again. He wonders if his current restlessness is a punishment for having ignored these feelings for so long or if it is simply a coincidence, stirred by the island's eerie ambiance. He cannot shake the sense that this place, this gathering, and these people are all forcing him to confront something inevitable. The connection between the setting and the company he keeps grows sharper, pointing to unresolved tensions that cannot be ignored any longer. Finally, he closes his eyes, not because he feels ready to sleep but because he has no other choice. His exhaustion is outweighed only by his dread, a fear that what waits for him in his dreams will be just as relentless as the memories that echo in his waking mind. Sleep becomes not a reprieve, but another battleground, one where he knows he will face the weight of a past that has never truly let go. The island may be remote, but its power to strip him of his defenses is undeniable, leaving him vulnerable to the very truths he's spent a lifetime avoiding.

Johnno: The Best Man

The gathering unfolds in a dimly lit, smoke-filled room where *The Best Man*, Johnno, finds himself surrounded by old friends and familiar faces, caught between nostalgia and the ever-present weight of the past. The atmosphere is thick with conversation, where memories of youth blur with the realities of adulthood, each guest weaving stories that dance between humor and discomfort. As the group moves on to dessert, a rich and precariously structured dark chocolate tart, Johnno fumbles, sending a piece flying off his plate. Laughter erupts, led by Duncan, whose teasing tone carries echoes of their school days, reigniting the group's well-worn dynamics. The moment, lighthearted on the surface, is charged with something deeper—an unspoken hierarchy, a lingering competition between them, subtly reminding **The Best Man** of the roles they all once played. Despite the good-natured ribbing, Johnno feels the old, familiar tug of being the one just outside the circle, always close enough to belong but never fully secure in his place.

The arrival of Hannah, a warm and energetic woman with a northern accent, shifts the conversation toward broader topics, offering Johnno a brief reprieve from the group's taunts. Her presence injects a refreshing contrast, and when she inquires about his life, the discussion veers toward his distaste for city living and his preference for the wilderness. He speaks of his passion for the outdoors, recounting his role in organizing a stag event filled with rugged adventure—kayaking through rough waters, scaling rocky cliffs—experiences that allowed him to reclaim a sense of purpose. As he speaks, Johnno feels a flicker of pride, momentarily forgetting the lingering frustrations of the night. Yet, the past has a way of creeping back in, and the conversation soon turns toward their shared history, particularly a tradition from their school days known as "Survival." The ritual, once a test of endurance, left boys stranded in the vast school grounds overnight, forcing them to navigate the dark until morning. While some recount the experience with exaggerated bravado, Johnno's own memories are more

complex—he recalls fear giving way to a kind of reckless invincibility, a transformation that still lingers in the way he sees the world.

As the evening wears on, the group shifts focus to Johnno’s attempt—and failure—to secure a spot on a television show, a moment of vulnerability that he tries to mask with humor. The sting of that rejection remains, a reminder that while others have carved out successful paths, he is still grasping for his own. To distract from his embarrassment, he introduces a bottle of whisky he has brought, a venture he has pursued in an effort to establish something meaningful beyond his outdoor escapades. The whisky becomes more than just a drink; it symbolizes his attempt to redefine himself, to prove that he is more than just an adventurer without direction. The group indulges, their appreciation of the spirit momentarily bridging old tensions, offering Johnno a fleeting sense of validation. The warmth of shared admiration, however, does little to erase the underlying fractures within the group, the remnants of competition and comparison still evident beneath the surface.

As the evening progresses, camaraderie shifts into something more reckless, as someone suggests a drinking game, an idea met with hesitation from Jules but quickly embraced by the others. The transition from casual conversation to an act of shared indulgence mirrors their school days, where moments of connection often carried an edge of risk. Whether fueled by nostalgia or a need to escape the realities of adulthood, they slip back into their old roles, clinging to the recklessness that once defined them. Beneath the laughter and playful jabs lies a deeper truth—each of them is grappling with the weight of expectation, the lingering pressure of who they were meant to become. The chapter masterfully explores themes of masculinity, friendship, and the haunting influence of past experiences, painting a portrait of men who, despite the years that have passed, are still tethered to the ghosts of their youth.

Several hours later: Olivia: The Bridesmaid

The marquee, once a place of celebration and warmth, now feels like a hollow shell, filled with people left stunned by the shocking revelation. The Bridesmaid stands among them, her face pale, processing the weight of what has just unfolded. The Irish police have spoken, their voices cold and unwavering, delivering the grim details of their discovery and the arrest that followed. The weight of their words lingers in the air, wrapping the gathered crowd in a shroud of confusion, fear, and hushed speculation. The only sound that persists is the faint rustling of foil blankets as people shift in their seats, a subtle but persistent reminder that, despite the stillness, life continues to move forward.

Olivia sits among them, but she feels detached, as if watching everything unfold from behind an invisible barrier. Her mind is a whirlwind of conflicting emotions—shock, disbelief, something that resembles relief but is quickly chased away by guilt. For months, her thoughts had been consumed by him, tangled in an obsession that she never fully understood, but now, with the news of his death, the weight of those thoughts takes on a new, unsettling form.

She struggles to process it, to align the cold finality of his absence with the person he had been just hours before. The memory of their last encounter replays in her mind, growing heavier with each pass, tainted by something she cannot ignore. The cake-cutting ceremony with Jules had been an ordinary moment, one that should have faded into the background of the night, but instead, it lingers with eerie significance.

A single, fleeting thought had crossed her mind during that moment—an impulse, a brief imagining of something violent. It had come and gone in an instant, dismissed as quickly as it arrived, but now it feels like an indictment, a damning piece of evidence buried within her own conscience. Did that thought matter? Did it mean something?

Could something so fleeting hold any real significance in the wake of what had happened?

The possibility that thoughts could have power beyond the mind unsettles her, making her question the thin, fragile line between impulse and reality. She had never considered herself capable of real harm, yet the thought had been there, however brief, however meaningless. And now, as she sits in the suffocating silence of the marquee, she cannot help but wonder—does thinking about something make it real? Does it plant a seed, an idea, that might someday manifest?

She steals a glance at the people around her, afraid to meet their eyes, afraid that they might see the doubt and fear creeping into her expression. The guilt she feels is irrational, but that does not make it any less suffocating. It clings to her, making her feel as though she has crossed a threshold she never meant to approach, as though she is complicit in a crime she never committed.

Her thoughts drift to Charlie, to their last conversation before the tragedy unfolded. It had been a simple exchange, nothing remarkable, but now it feels laced with an unease she can’t place. She wonders if, deep down, she had already sensed something was wrong, if the universe had tried to warn her in ways she had ignored.

Doubt tightens its grip, forcing her to confront a truth she does not want to face—that darkness does not always exist in the outside world but sometimes lingers within, quiet and unnoticed. It is an uncomfortable realization, one that makes her feel unsteady, as though she is teetering on the edge of something she does not yet understand. She tries to push the thought away, to remind herself that a passing idea means nothing, that everyone has fleeting moments of darkness, but the weight of it remains, heavy and unrelenting.

The marquee, once so full of life, now feels like a waiting room for something inevitable, something unseen yet undeniably present. The whispered conversations around her are subdued, punctuated by the occasional glance toward the entrance, as though expecting another announcement, another revelation. Olivia presses her hands

together to stop them from trembling, grounding herself in the sensation of her fingers against her palms, in the physical proof that she is still here, still real, still separate from the darkness she fears might exist within her.

As the minutes pass, the weight in her chest does not lessen. Instead, it settles deeper, embedding itself into her thoughts, shaping the way she sees the events of the night. She knows the truth—that she did nothing wrong, that thoughts are not actions, that fear is not guilt—but the uncertainty remains, whispering questions she cannot yet answer.

Even as the marquee remains filled with people, Olivia has never felt more alone. The island, the tragedy, the quiet terror in her own mind—they are all wrapped around her, binding her to a moment that she cannot yet escape. And as she sits in the silence, unable to find comfort in the presence of others, she begins to wonder if she will ever truly be free of it, or if this moment will linger within her forever.

Olivia: The Bridesmaid

Olivia, the bridesmaid, stands among the wedding guests, yet she feels like a stranger in her own skin, detached from the joyous atmosphere that surrounds her. The air is crisp, sending chills through her thin dress, but the cold does not bother her as much as the weight of her emotions. She clenches the bouquet in her hands, the sharp thorns digging into her skin, a sting she barely registers as she discreetly licks away the blood, unwilling to let anyone see the cracks forming beneath her composed exterior.

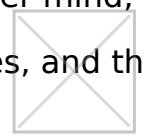
The wedding ceremony has ended, but the endless cycle of photographs and social niceties only intensifies her discomfort. She forces smiles, answers questions, and nods at polite comments, all while feeling the suffocating gaze of her mother and cousin Beth, who seem to sense that something is wrong. The mention of Callum, the man who once promised her a future, sends a sharp pang through her chest, a reminder of how easily he disappeared when she needed him most.

Trapped in a role she no longer understands, Olivia struggles to reconcile the version of herself that once existed—the carefree, lively girl her family remembers—with the hollow figure she has become. The disconnect is unbearable, made worse by the pity in her relatives' eyes and the silent judgment lurking beneath their concern. She wants to scream, to tell them that their questions only deepen the ache, but instead, she offers a half-hearted excuse and slips away from the reception, searching for solace in the only place that makes sense—the cliffs.

As she moves toward the rugged coastline, the sound of the waves crashing against the rocks grows louder, a constant, rhythmic force that drowns out the noise in her mind. The salty wind lashes against her skin, tugging at her dress and hair, as if urging her to let go, to surrender to the elements. For a brief moment, she closes her eyes and allows herself to imagine a world where none of this exists—where the weight of

her grief, her shame, and her loneliness are washed away with the tide.

Descending toward the beach, Olivia stumbles on the uneven ground, her palms scraping against jagged stones as she catches herself. The sharp pain barely registers, blending with the deeper, more profound agony that she has carried for weeks—the secret she cannot share, the decision that changed everything. The memory of her abortion floods her mind, each detail etched into her consciousness, the sterile clinic, the hushed voices, and the overwhelming sense of isolation as she faced it alone.



Callum had promised to stand by her, but his words had been as fleeting as the wind, vanishing when she needed them most. The weight of his absence, the crushing realization that she had been left to carry the burden alone, has left her feeling adrift, disconnected from her own body. The girl she used to be—the one who laughed easily, who believed in love, who thought she had a future worth fighting for—feels like a distant memory, someone she no longer recognizes.

At the shoreline, Olivia kneels, her fingers trembling as she traces the cold, damp sand, seeking something, anything, to ground her. She reaches into her pocket, feeling the familiar weight of a small blade, her last refuge in a world that feels increasingly unbearable. The sharp sting of metal against her skin is a fleeting moment of clarity, a sensation that reminds her she is still here, still capable of feeling, even if the pain is self-inflicted.

Each shallow cut becomes a silent plea, an unspoken confession of the emotions she cannot articulate—the grief, the shame, the suffocating loneliness that lingers despite the people surrounding her. She watches as the blood seeps into the sand, a stark contrast against the pale earth, a reminder that even pain must find an outlet. The waves inch closer, licking at her feet, as though urging her to take another step, to give in to the pull of the sea and let it swallow her whole.

The vastness of the ocean reflects the emptiness inside her, an expanse that offers both escape and finality, an eerie kind of peace that tempts her more than it should. She stands at the water’s edge, caught between the desire to disappear and the faint

whisper of something that keeps her tethered to the present. In this moment, she is neither fully here nor completely gone, lingering in the delicate space between giving in to the abyss and searching for a reason to hold on.



Jules: The Bride

The Bride, Jules, had envisioned her wedding day as a meticulously planned celebration, the pinnacle of happiness. However, the moment unravels when she realizes her husband, Will, is missing. Moving through the lavishly decorated marquee, she scans the crowd, her heart tightening with each passing second. The once-adoring guests, who had been fixated on her and Will only hours before, are now lost in their own revelry, oblivious to her rising concern. The reception has shifted from an elegant affair to a chaotic celebration, where nostalgia and indulgence take center stage. Laughter, music, and clinking glasses fill the air, yet The Bride feels detached, as if she is merely an observer in a world where everyone else is carefree. When her cousin Beth casually mentions that Will was last seen helping Olivia—the one person who always seemed to invite trouble—Jules is hit with an immediate wave of unease.

The name Olivia stirs something deep within Jules, an instinctual dread she can’t quite shake. Olivia had been acting strangely all evening, and though Jules had dismissed it as wedding-day stress, her absence with Will now feels calculated, deliberate. She steps outside the marquee, expecting to find them nearby, but instead, she is met with a group of smokers from their university days, caught up in laughter and casual conversation. Their indifference irritates her, their responses clipped and uninterested as if her concern is an overreaction. How could they not see that something was wrong? The feeling of isolation gnaws at her, tightening her chest as she realizes that, despite the grandeur of the occasion, she feels completely and utterly alone.

Determined to find her husband, Jules pushes forward, her heels sinking slightly into the damp grass as she moves away from the warmth and glow of the celebration. The fairy-tale moment she had imagined—her perfect wedding night—now feels distant, fading like an illusion she had foolishly believed in. Instead of basking in the romance of her newlywed evening, she is wandering through the dark, searching for a husband

who should be by her side. Each step feels heavier, her thoughts racing with possibilities she doesn't want to consider. What if Will had willingly left with Olivia? What if he wasn't missing but deliberately avoiding her? A sick feeling twists in her stomach as she realizes how little she truly knows about what he is capable of.

The night takes on an eerie stillness as she distances herself from the noisy reception, her surroundings dark and unfamiliar. The twinkling lights and floral arrangements feel like remnants of a dream that no longer belongs to her. She had spent months perfecting every detail of this wedding, ensuring every moment would be flawless, yet here she was, chasing after a husband who had vanished without a word. The irony stings, a cruel reminder that no amount of planning can control the unexpected. The guests continue to celebrate, oblivious to the fact that the bride is unraveling, her dream slipping further from her grasp with each passing moment. She clenches her fists, determined not to let the night collapse into disaster, but the truth is already settling in—something is very, very wrong.

Panic begins to set in as Jules retraces her steps, moving back toward the marquee with renewed urgency. She needs answers, but no one around her seems to care enough to provide them. Everyone is caught up in their own indulgences, their own escapes, treating the wedding as if it is just another extravagant party. The realization leaves her feeling hollow, her frustration turning into anger. She had crafted this night with precision, making sure every detail was perfect—so why did it feel like she was the only one who cared? The thought is suffocating, wrapping around her like a weight she can't shake.

As she stops for a moment, catching her breath, an unsettling thought creeps into her mind: What if she doesn't find Will? And, perhaps even worse, what if she does? The weight of that question lingers, heavier than anything else. She knows, deep down, that whatever she discovers will change everything, that the illusion of her perfect wedding is already cracking beyond repair. The night is no longer a celebration; it has become a mystery waiting to unfold, and Jules is terrified of what she will uncover.

Aoife: The Wedding Planner

The Wedding Planner had seen it all, but even I wasn’t prepared for the chaos that unfolded as the night spiraled beyond control. The refined elegance of the wedding reception had given way to the uninhibited revelry that always seemed inevitable. As I made my rounds, ensuring everything remained as orderly as possible, I stumbled upon an unexpected sight—the bridal suite, meant to be a sanctuary for the newlyweds, had been invaded. Two guests, half-dressed and obviously intoxicated, lay sprawled across the pristine bed, their carefree expressions unbothered by my presence. They didn’t even bother to apologize, merely flashing grins as if I was the one intruding. Frustration simmered beneath my composed exterior, but as **The Wedding Planner**, I knew better than to waste time on reprimands. Instead, I ushered them out, locked the door behind me, and sighed, wondering if anything sacred remained untouched by the night’s descent into debauchery.

Returning to the heart of the celebration, I took my usual place at the sidelines, the unseen force ensuring that every glass remained full and every minor catastrophe was swiftly handled. It was my job to fade into the background, to be the invisible architect of the evening’s seamless flow. The best weddings are the ones where no one realizes how much effort goes into making everything look effortless. But tonight, with the atmosphere shifting from elegant sophistication to borderline anarchy, it felt more like steering a ship through a storm. Guests who had begun the evening with polished manners and refined conversation were now draped over chairs, voices slurred with excess, laughter turning raucous. The transformation was expected—predictable, even—but it always fascinated me how quickly people shed their restraint when given permission by alcohol and celebration.

As the night wore on, the crowd’s uninhibited nature took a sharper edge, and sure enough, a commotion erupted near the bar. It wasn’t a full-blown brawl, but it was

enough to momentarily freeze the party, shifting attention from music and dancing to the rising tension between two intoxicated men. Glasses clinked hastily onto tables, conversation dipped, and an uncertain murmur passed through the crowd. I stepped in swiftly, my presence alone enough to signal that the nonsense needed to end. With a practiced calm, I placed a firm hand on one shoulder, issued a quiet but unyielding command, and watched as the moment defused. Sheepish apologies were exchanged, hands clasped in uneasy truce, and just like that, the music swelled again, the party resuming as if nothing had happened. Another fire extinguished before it could blaze out of control.

Watching the evening unravel in its inevitable way, I reflected on the duality of human nature. Just hours ago, these same guests were poised and dignified, sipping champagne and offering carefully curated compliments. Now, they were revealing their wilder, more unfiltered selves—the versions of themselves that only emerged in the haze of celebration and indulgence. I'd seen it time and time again, this slow unraveling, this delicate balancing act between decorum and revelry. And yet, it never ceased to intrigue me, the way a single event could hold both refinement and chaos in equal measure. It was precisely this unpredictability that made my job as exhausting as it was exhilarating. No two weddings were ever the same, and each came with its own unique challenges—a blend of meticulous preparation and the inevitable moments of improvisation.

Finally, after ensuring that no new disasters were brewing, I stepped outside the marquee for a breath of fresh air. The cool night breeze was a stark contrast to the heat and noise within, a welcome moment of solitude amidst the whirlwind of responsibilities. Laughter and music still spilled from the tent, muted now, distant but persistent, a reminder that the night was still far from over. I let myself take it in—the chaos, the charm, the sheer energy of it all. Every wedding was a puzzle, a carefully constructed event that inevitably veered toward unpredictability. But that was the beauty of it—the ebb and flow, the shift from poise to disorder, the raw emotions that surfaced when people let go of pretenses. As I gazed back at the marquee, watching the guests twirling beneath the glow of string lights, I knew that despite the madness,

this was what made it all worth it. In the end, weddings weren’t about perfection; they were about the unforgettable, messy, beautiful moments that made them real.



Earlier that day: Jules: The Bride

The depth of parental love is something that defies time, distance, and even the challenges that come with growing up and drifting apart. There is an undeniable connection, an unshakable bond that persists despite the inevitable changes that life brings. As parents watch their child transition from the innocence of childhood to the milestone moments of adulthood, such as becoming "*The Bride*", the immense pride and affection they hold are often accompanied by bittersweet emotions. The quiet, ever-present fear of losing them—whether to time, to life’s uncertainties, or to the embrace of another—remains. No matter how much they grow, succeed, or move forward in life, a part of them remains intertwined with the heart of the one who raised them. As a parent, you watch them take their first steps, navigate childhood’s joys and trials, and then eventually step into adulthood, where they begin writing their own story.

As I watch Jules today, standing before family and friends, radiant in love and confidence, I see not just the daughter I raised but a woman who has carved out her own remarkable path. She has built a life filled with ambition and purpose, a testament to her strength and determination. But above all her successes, the greatest achievement I see is her ability to love and to be loved in return. In Will, she has found someone who doesn’t just admire her from afar but stands beside her, a partner willing to share in her dreams and walk through life’s uncertainties with her. Love is not just about grand gestures or fleeting moments of passion—it is about finding someone who will stand by your side when the world feels overwhelming, who will remind you of your worth even in your weakest moments. Today, as I look at my daughter, I am reminded that she has found that kind of love, the kind that endures and strengthens with time.

The way they look at each other speaks volumes—an understanding, a trust, an unspoken language built on years of shared moments and unwavering commitment. This is not just a union of two individuals; it is a merging of lives, dreams, and families. And while she may no longer need my guidance in the way she once did, the pride I feel for her today surpasses even the love I have carried for her since the day she was born. She has chosen well, and in Will, she has found someone deserving of her heart. As parents, we can only hope that our children find a love that mirrors the unconditional support we have tried to give them. Seeing them embark on this journey together, hand in hand, reassures me that she has found someone who will cherish and uplift her.

So, to my daughter on her wedding day: While you may no longer seek my advice as you once did, know that my love for you is unwavering, my pride in you immeasurable. And to Will, welcome to our family. You have won the love of the most incredible person I know, and with that comes the great responsibility of cherishing her, supporting her, and ensuring her happiness. Together, I have no doubt that you will weather life’s storms and embrace its joys with the same strength that brought you together. Marriage is not about perfection but about perseverance, about choosing each other every single day, in the small moments and the grand ones. It is about facing life’s uncertainties with the unwavering belief that, no matter what comes, you will find your way through it together.

I raise my glass to both of you, to a future that is bright and filled with laughter, love, and resilience. As the applause erupts around us, filling the space with warmth and celebration, for a moment, all doubts, tensions, and complexities fade away. In this fleeting instant, we are bound by something greater than ourselves—the enduring power of love, the triumph of connection, and the promise of new beginnings. And though the flickering electricity reminds us of life’s unpredictability, it is the bonds we share that truly illuminate the room, reminding us all of what matters most. Love, at its core, is about finding home in another person, and today, we celebrate the beautiful home Jules and Will have built together.

The next day: Hannah: The Plus-One

The morning after the harrowing events, Hannah boards the boat with Charlie, heading back to the mainland. The departure feels surreal, as though the tranquil waters and the shimmering sunlight are mocking the storm of emotions churning inside her. Most of the guests had already left earlier, leaving the family to linger in the aftermath of the tragedy, tethered to the island and its dark history. As the boat gently rocks over the waves, Hannah's gaze drifts back toward the island, now cloaked in shadows under a dense, looming cloud. It feels less like a piece of land and more like a predator lying in wait, ominous and unrelenting, its presence etched into her memory.

The striking contrast between the island's natural beauty and the suffocating darkness of its secrets amplifies the turmoil within Hannah. She cannot reconcile the serene image of sunlight glinting on the water with the reality of what transpired there. The revelation of Will's involvement in her sister's death feels like a wound that will never heal, raw and aching with every thought. It's as though the island itself has imprinted on her, a reminder that some places carry pain so profound they linger long after you leave them behind.

Her physical discomfort from the boat's motion pales in comparison to the emotional anguish she bears. Memories flood her mind, unrelenting, as she recalls the ferry ride to the island just days before. Back then, she and Charlie had shared lighthearted moments, their laughter filling the air, a reflection of their easy companionship. But now, silence stretches between them like an impassable void, heavy with the weight of all that has been left unsaid.

Charlie sits beside her, but he feels distant, lost in his own thoughts, his presence a mere shadow of the person who once brought her comfort. The closeness they once shared has been fractured, not by words or arguments, but by the sheer magnitude of

their shared grief and guilt. Hannah wonders if this silence is permanent, if the trauma they endured has built walls they can never dismantle.

The longer she sits in silence, the more she finds herself replaying their last conversation before everything fell apart. It feels like a lifetime ago, yet it lingers vividly in her mind, a stark reminder of how quickly everything changed. Exhaustion weighs heavily on her—physical, mental, and emotional—leaving her unable to articulate the storm within her or even begin to process the full extent of what they've been through.



This journey back to the mainland feels like more than a return to a physical place; it's an emotional passage, one marked by grief, guilt, and the daunting task of finding closure. The water stretches endlessly around them, mirroring the uncertainty she feels about the future and the path ahead. The boat moves forward, but Hannah feels stuck, tethered to the memories of the island and the horrors she cannot yet leave behind.

The island may be growing smaller in the distance, but its presence remains overwhelming in her mind. Its secrets, its darkness, and the pain it holds have left an indelible mark on her, one she knows will take more than time to fade. She glances at Charlie, hoping for a flicker of connection, but his face is unreadable, his thoughts locked away in the same private torment she feels.

For Hannah, the journey ahead is uncertain and filled with unresolved questions. How do you navigate a world that feels so altered, so unfamiliar, after everything you've learned and endured? She knows the road to healing will be long and fraught with challenges, but for now, all she can do is focus on surviving the moment, one breath at a time.

As the mainland grows closer, the reality of what awaits begins to sink in. The questions, the explanations, the lingering weight of what they've experienced—it all feels overwhelming, like a tidal wave she's not ready to face. But as she grips the edge of her seat and exhales deeply, she reminds herself that she is still here, still moving

forward, no matter how slow or difficult the journey might feel.

Even as the boat docks and the mainland comes into view, Hannah knows the hardest part of the journey is only beginning. The island may be behind her now, but its hold on her mind and heart will take far longer to loosen. She steps off the boat, steadying herself, bracing for the next chapter of a story she never wanted to live but must now carry with her. The search for closure, for answers, and for some semblance of peace is only just beginning.



Aoife: The Wedding Planner

In "AOIFE: The Wedding Planner," Aoife finds herself deeply immersed in the final preparations for a wedding taking place on the beautiful, remote island of Inis an Amplóra, which lies off the Connemara coast in Ireland. As she sits at her desk, she’s surrounded by keepsakes that evoke fond memories, items that anchor her to her past. With the soft hum of Galway radio filling the background, she listens to the weather forecast, which warns of strong winds later in the day—a potential challenge for the outdoor festivities ahead. Though concerned, Aoife remains focused on the task at hand. Her husband, Freddy, enters the room with his own concerns, mainly about the electrical setup for the wedding, an issue they had spent the early morning addressing together. Their exchange naturally veers into a conversation about Freddy’s childhood, shaped by monotonous meals and a limited diet, providing a poignant moment of reflection about how far they've come since their youth and how their personal histories continue to influence the present.

Aoife moves on to inspect the marquee set up for the event, nestled among the heather on the island’s outskirts. The landscape around her is stark and dramatic, yet beautiful in its wildness. As she walks, hares cross her path, and the sight triggers memories of Gaelic folklore, evoking a sense of mystique about the island's reputation. The locals have long referred to Inis an Amplóra as "the dead place," due to its past and the eerie, desolate feel it can sometimes impart. Aoife, however, is determined to alter that perception. She imagines the marquee, a space that once felt like part of a barren land, now brimming with life and joy. With each thoughtful detail—hand-painted menus, candles from an exclusive Galway perfumer—she envisions the transformation of the venue into a lively celebration of love, happiness, and hope. Aoife hopes this wedding will counteract the island’s reputation, replacing its air of foreboding with vibrancy and warmth, a celebration of life where none previously seemed possible.

As she makes her final rounds, ensuring every aspect is in place, Aoife is unexpectedly joined by the groom, Will Slater, known to her from his role in the popular TV show *Survive the Night*. Their meeting, though surprising, feels comfortable enough, as they engage in light conversation about the wedding. Will’s easy charm quickly becomes evident, but Aoife remains mindful of the professional nature of their relationship. She can't help but reflect on her own history as they speak: her childhood spent in Dublin, summers she cherished on the island, and the transient life they led due to her father’s career as a university professor. The complexities of her own upbringing shape her understanding of the event, as Aoife considers how these memories inform her current role. Will’s interest in her personal life is apparent, but Aoife keeps the conversation focused, reminding herself that this is her business, not a chance for personal connection. She remains resolute, determined to maintain a professional distance despite his charm.

Will, seemingly aware of the undercurrents of tension surrounding the event, expresses some concerns about the evening's festivities. He hints at the unpredictable nature of their guests and the potential challenges that could arise from their high energy. Aoife listens thoughtfully, aware that her role requires both flexibility and precision to handle such moments. While Will’s comments are valid, Aoife knows that the night is going to be full of surprises, and she is prepared to manage them. The exchange subtly underscores the balancing act she faces—maintaining control while navigating the emotional undercurrents of an event that is both deeply personal for the couple and a professional responsibility for her. As the day moves forward, Aoife feels the weight of her role more deeply, understanding that this wedding is not just about bringing together two people but about managing the layers of meaning, history, and expectation that surround it. This chapter highlights Aoife's awareness of the delicate line she treads between personal involvement and professional duty, a line that becomes more apparent as she reflects on her own identity and the emotional complexity of her work.

Jules: The Bride

The Bride, Jules, steps into her mother’s room, immediately enveloped by the familiar scent of expensive perfume and the meticulous precision of her mother’s beauty routine. The air is thick with floral undertones and the quiet hum of preparation, as if every movement is rehearsed, every detail carefully curated. Jules watches as her mother applies her signature makeup, a ritual so ingrained that it almost seems like a performance in itself. She stands stiffly, holding onto the version of herself she has crafted for this weekend—the perfect bride, composed and radiant, unaffected by doubt or distraction. Yet, beneath the surface, frustration simmers. Olivia’s disinterest in the wedding gnaws at her, an absence that feels both personal and pointed. She chose Olivia, her younger half-sister, to stand beside her, believing that this act of inclusion would bridge the gap between them. But instead, Olivia has been distant, uninterested in the details, skipping the hen party, and failing to match the enthusiasm expected of a bridesmaid.

Jules broaches the subject carefully, attempting to mask her irritation beneath casual concern, but her mother’s response is far from what she anticipates. There is no rush to defend Jules’s feelings, no immediate acknowledgment of her frustration—only a quiet sigh and a dismissive wave of the hand. Her mother speaks with a knowing air, suggesting that Olivia’s detachment is not personal, but rather a reflection of something deeper, something Jules does not fully understand. She hints at Olivia’s recent struggles, at wounds still raw and unspoken, drawing an implicit comparison to her own past experiences. The remark unsettles Jules, stirring old memories of her teenage heartbreak, a love lost in a flurry of youth and naivety. Back then, when she had been drowning in grief, her mother had barely acknowledged it, brushing aside her feelings as melodramatic and fleeting. And yet, here she is, extending a sympathy toward Olivia that Jules had never been granted. The realization stings, fueling an old

resentment that has never quite faded.

Their conversation drifts toward the past, unearthing the struggles that shaped their family long before this wedding. Jules listens as her mother recalls the aftermath of her father’s departure, the strain of single motherhood, and the relentless pursuit of an acting career that demanded more than it gave. It is a story Jules has heard before, yet it never ceases to remind her of the gaps in their relationship, the spaces where love and understanding should have been, but never quite settled. Her mother speaks of sacrifices, of choices made in survival mode, and while Jules acknowledges the difficulty of those years, she cannot shake the feeling that she was always expected to be strong, to require less. Olivia, on the other hand, is handled with delicate care, as though she is fragile in ways Jules never was allowed to be. The favoritism—intentional or not—sits uncomfortably between them, unspoken but undeniable.

As Jules presses for more details about Olivia’s struggles, her mother remains evasive, her words carefully measured. There is a softness in her tone, a protectiveness that Jules cannot help but envy. She realizes, with a quiet bitterness, that empathy does not come as naturally to her as it does to her mother, or at least not in ways that are easily expressed. Jules prides herself on control, on logic, on crafting the life she wants through precision and effort, but emotions—especially messy, unpredictable ones—have always felt like a weakness rather than a necessity. She wonders if this is why Olivia keeps her distance, why they will never be the kind of sisters who confide in each other beneath fairy lights and whispered secrets. The thought unsettles her, leaving a hollowness in her chest that she does not have the time nor the patience to examine too closely.

As she prepares to leave, the conversation lingers in the back of her mind, intertwining itself with her thoughts about the wedding, about Will, about the life she is about to step into. The excitement she should be feeling is dulled by an unease she cannot quite name, a nagging sensation that something within her family—within herself—is still unresolved. Olivia’s absence, her mother’s quiet sympathies, the memories that refuse to stay buried—it all swirls together, forming a tension that does not belong in

the script of a perfect wedding. But Jules, ever the pragmatist, pushes it aside. She has spent her entire life mastering the art of control, of keeping things moving forward regardless of the chaos beneath the surface. Tomorrow, she will walk down the aisle, smile for the cameras, and promise herself to Will in a flawless display of love and commitment. Whatever lingers in the shadows of her past and her family dynamics will have to wait.



The day before: Jules: The Bride

On the night before her wedding, The Bride, Jules, finds herself at a dinner that serves as both a reunion and an arena for unresolved family tensions. The evening is supposed to be a celebration, yet beneath the surface, it is anything but harmonious. Her father, Ronan, a self-made property developer whose thick Galway accent and commanding presence fill any room, makes a dramatic entrance, immediately disrupting the evening's balance. Hannah, Jules's guest and longtime friend, seems visibly startled by his brashness, unaccustomed to the way he dominates the space. At his side is Séverine, his much younger French wife, whose presence is a study in effortless grace, her beauty overshadowing any need for deeper conversation. Séverine moves through the gathering with the practiced ease of someone who has learned how to exist within the complicated dynamics of a powerful man's past marriages, balancing the expectations placed upon her without resistance. The Bride watches the way her father sizes up her fiancé, Will, and notices how the usually poised and confident man she is about to marry seems slightly diminished, his shoulders a little tighter, his words more carefully chosen.

As the dinner progresses, the weight of familial expectation becomes more apparent, creating an invisible force pressing against the edges of the gathering. Jules's mother, Araminta, an artist with a penchant for dramatics and self-indulgence, makes her presence known not through volume, but through carefully crafted remarks that are as cutting as they are subtle. The tension between mother and daughter is ever-present, woven into the fabric of their relationship, manifesting through passive-aggressive jabs that Jules endures with gritted teeth. The meal unfolds with a strange mix of forced civility and underlying competition, where each member of the family seems eager to prove something—whether it be status, importance, or control. Jules, always attuned to the unspoken games her parents play, finds herself caught between trying to keep

the peace and resisting the urge to lash out. Meanwhile, the estate's overseers, Aoife and Freddy, provide an unexpected sense of normalcy, their professional detachment making them the only people at the table seemingly unaffected by the complex web of history and grievances that everyone else is navigating. Their calm efficiency offers Jules a brief reprieve from the suffocating atmosphere, though it does little to soften the emotional strain of the night.

As the evening wears on, Jules is forced to confront the ghosts of her past while trying to stay focused on the future she is about to step into. Seated at the table, she steals glances at Hannah, her younger sister, their once-close bond now weakened by years of growing apart and unspoken resentments. She wonders if Hannah notices the same fractures in their family that she does, or if she has learned to tune them out, the way Jules once tried to. Thoughts of Charlie, her first love, creep in unexpectedly, forcing Jules to question whether she has truly moved on, or if there is still a part of her that lingers in the past, wondering what could have been. The emotional weight of the night reaches its peak when Araminta, raising a glass, offers a toast. What should have been a heartfelt acknowledgment of Jules's wedding turns into a moment for Araminta to bask in her own past glories, her words dripping with nostalgia and self-congratulation. Jules, accustomed to her mother's ability to make any event about herself, maintains a composed expression, offering the obligatory polite smile. But deep down, frustration simmers, the moment serving as yet another reminder of the complicated relationship she has spent years navigating.

As the evening winds down, Jules cannot shake the feeling that her wedding is not just a union of love, but a stage upon which old wounds, unspoken tensions, and unresolved conflicts are about to be laid bare. The island's isolation, which once seemed like an advantage, now feels more like a pressure cooker, containing every strained relationship within its borders with no easy escape. The weight of expectation from both her parents, the barely concealed tension with Will, and the unresolved echoes of her past all press against her, making her question whether the life she has carefully constructed is as stable as she once believed. As she prepares for the final hours before her wedding, she knows one thing for certain—this night, and the

emotions it has stirred, will not be easily forgotten.



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Johnno: The Best Man

Johnno and Will stand in the damp, cavernous darkness, their breath echoing against the stone walls as years of suppressed guilt rise between them. The Best Man was supposed to be a title of honor, yet for Johnno, it has become a reminder of the burden he has carried alone for too long. The weight of unspoken truths presses heavily on his chest, while Will stands opposite him, arms crossed, his expression unreadable. The silence stretches between them, thick with tension, before Johnno finally speaks, his voice raw with frustration and sorrow. He has spent years trying to make sense of what they did, grappling with the reality of their past mistake, while Will has seemingly moved forward, untouched by the memories that haunt Johnno’s every waking moment. The confrontation is long overdue, yet now that he is face to face with the only other person who knows the full extent of their crime, Johnno finds his words catching in his throat. He expected The Best Man to be different—to show some sign of remorse, to bear some mark of the weight they both should have carried—but Will remains as composed as ever, as if their secret is nothing more than an unfortunate footnote in his otherwise successful life.

The memory of that fateful day replays in Johnno’s mind with agonizing clarity, the moment they took a cruel joke too far. What started as a childish prank—another round of their twisted game, "Survival"—turned into something much darker when they set their sights on a quiet, unsuspecting boy known only as "Loner." At first, it had seemed harmless, just a way to test his limits, to see how much he could endure before breaking. But when Loner stumbled upon their stolen exam papers, the stakes shifted, and suddenly, Will wasn’t just playing a game anymore—he was covering his tracks. The plan to scare Loner into silence escalated into something sinister, their recklessness fueled by arrogance and fear. They had tied him to a handrail at the base of the cliffs, laughing at his protests, never truly believing that the rising tide would reach him. By the time morning arrived, the reality of what they had done crashed

down on them with the force of the waves that had swallowed Loner whole.

Johnno had spent the years since then living in the shadow of that single, unforgivable act, unable to escape the guilt that clawed at his conscience. Every decision he made, every failed attempt to move on, was stained with the memory of the boy they left behind. Will, on the other hand, had built a career, a life, an identity that did not include the stain of their past. It enrages Johnno—the ease with which Will has buried their sins, the way he can stand here now, meeting Johnno's pain with indifference. He demands answers, desperate to know how Will can sleep at night, how he can justify what they did. Will, ever the pragmatist, shrugs it off, calling it an accident, a mistake of youth that they could not have foreseen. He argues that dwelling on it won't change anything, that they did what they had to do to protect themselves, and that there is no point in rehashing the past. But Johnno refuses to let him rewrite history, refuses to let him escape accountability so easily.

The cave feels suffocating now, the walls closing in as Johnno realizes the futility of this confrontation. Will will never confess, never break under the weight of their shared secret, because he simply doesn't carry it the way Johnno does. The moral chasm between them has grown too wide, and for the first time, Johnno sees Will not as a friend but as a stranger—someone capable of burying the truth so deeply that it no longer touches him. Their voices bounce off the walls, the echoes stretching out like ghosts demanding justice, but justice will never come. Johnno wanted closure, wanted to believe that confronting Will would bring some kind of absolution, but instead, it only solidifies his isolation. As he looks at Will, standing there unaffected, Johnno realizes that he has been alone in this all along. Some people, he now understands, can walk away from even the worst sins untouched. Others, like him, are doomed to carry them forever.

Now: The wedding night

In "The Wedding Night," a search party sets out into a chaotic, storm-lashed night, the only source of light coming from the flickering paraffin torches that struggle to stay lit against the intensity of the wind. The night around them seems alive with the fury of nature; the gusts of wind howl like a physical presence, battering the group as they move forward. The terrain is treacherous and narrow, bordered by the eerie expanse of peat bogs that are invisible in the darkness, yet their potential dangers loom large. As they venture deeper into the wild, the group feels a sense of urgency pushing them forward, tapping into a primitive, almost reckless bravery that recalls moments from their youth—nights spent facing difficult odds with a sense of wild energy. The storm around them is not just an obstacle; it becomes a character in itself, an antagonist that fights them at every step, forcing the group to reckon with their own physical limits and the harshness of the environment.

Their mission is vital and filled with uncertainty: they must find a woman, presumably a waitress, who might be lost, injured, or worse, having screamed in distress against the roar of the wind. Despite the pressing need to cover more ground, the group instinctively stays close together, knowing that venturing too far could risk both their safety and their ability to assist one another. This decision to remain in tight proximity highlights the palpable fear of isolation that hangs over them, a fear that becomes all the more real in the darkness of the night. The landscape is unforgiving, and their voices are swallowed by the wind, rendering their calls into the void both futile and haunting. Each shout into the dark is a reminder of their helplessness; the storm, indifferent to their distress, only amplifies the feelings of insignificance and powerlessness they experience as they search desperately for any sign of the missing woman. It becomes a race not only against time but against the encroaching sense of being lost in an immense and uncaring world.

As the men continue their grim task, the dialogue between Angus and Duncan brings a human element to the ordeal, grounding the physical discomfort of the situation in more relatable emotions. Their conversation reveals the fear that is slowly taking hold of them as they press forward, unsure whether they are chasing a real danger or merely the product of overactive imaginations. The panic that drives the waitress's scream seems to echo within their own hearts, as they wonder what circumstances could have led to such a desperate cry. Duncan and Angus begin to question the nature of their current reality, where the surrealness of the situation, coupled with the primal fear of being out of control, forces them to confront not only the dangers of the night but their deeper, unspoken fears. This exploration of fear, anxiety, and vulnerability creates a powerful contrast with the immediate task at hand. The wildness of the storm and the relentless darkness evoke a sense of man versus nature, but also of man versus self—forcing the characters to face their own internal struggles in addition to the external threats they face.

The tension between the group intensifies, not just because of the storm but due to the emotional undercurrents that have always existed between the men. Their shared history, full of youthful bravado and now tempered by the weight of adult responsibilities, begins to surface as the night drags on. They are no longer the young men who faced challenges with a sense of invincibility; now, they are men bound by the complexities of life, questioning their choices, their past, and the people they have become. The external search for the waitress is mirrored by an internal search for meaning, for answers to questions that are too difficult to voice aloud. As they face the physical and emotional challenges of the night, it becomes clear that their confrontation with nature is inextricably linked to a confrontation with their own unresolved issues. The tension between their past and present selves, set against the backdrop of a storm that refuses to relent, forms the emotional backbone of this chapter, creating a layered narrative that explores not just survival, but the cost of confronting one’s fears in the face of overwhelming odds.

Aoife: The Wedding Planner

Aoife, the wedding planner, stands at the edge of the bustling scene as guests begin to arrive on the island, each one adding to the layers of complexity she has worked so hard to manage. The sky above is clear, and the atmosphere feels promising, but Aoife's eyes are sharp, noticing every small detail as the guests disembark from their boats. Dressed in functional attire designed for comfort and efficiency, she feels somewhat out of place against the backdrop of extravagantly dressed guests, all of whom are attending the high-profile wedding of a well-known lifestyle magazine owner and a popular TV star. Despite feeling the stark contrast between her role and the guests' glamorous appearance, Aoife is fully aware of the gravity of her position—her task is to ensure everything runs smoothly and that every need, from comfort to seasickness, is swiftly addressed. As the guests move into the venue, Aoife remains constantly on the move, a figure of calm authority amid the rising energy of excitement and anticipation.

Reflecting briefly on her own childhood memories of the island, Aoife finds herself thinking back to a time when she roamed freely, unburdened by the adult responsibilities she now shoulders. The sea, once an endless source of joy and wonder, now carries a weight of caution and forethought, a stark contrast to the carefree girl she once was. In those days, she had viewed the ocean as a vast playground, but years of working on the island and dealing with its unpredictable nature have instilled in her a more measured and cautious approach. The arrival of the groom's parents signals a moment of significance in the unfolding day. Even before the formal introduction, Aoife’s sharp eye picks out the father’s imposing figure, his presence commanding attention, much like the power of a Roman emperor. His posture, his movement, and even the way he holds himself all suggest authority and a clear expectation for how things should be conducted, especially when it comes to seating

arrangements. There is a clear air of dominance about him, and Aoife can sense that her interactions with him will require the utmost care and professionalism.

When Aoife learns that the groom’s father is the headmaster of Trevellyan’s, an exclusive boys' school attended by several of the guests, she begins to understand the source of his commanding presence. His reputation as a strict disciplinarian is well-known, and the atmosphere in the room shifts when he enters, as people instinctively straighten up and adopt more formal postures. The guests’ reactions to him are a mixture of respect and quiet apprehension, and Aoife recognizes that this figure is not just a parent of the groom but a person whose authority extends far beyond this event. His influence over the guests is palpable, and although Aoife acknowledges the respect he commands, she can’t shake the sense of personal distaste she feels towards him. His rigid, almost militant demeanor reminds her of figures in her past that were difficult to please, further coloring her perception of him. This exchange, though brief, shows the complex interplay of power and personal emotion in social settings, especially in high-profile events like this one. Aoife’s ability to navigate such dynamics with poise is critical, and it’s clear that her interactions with the groom’s father will be tempered by a careful balancing act of professional distance and personal feelings.

After the final boat arrives, Aoife turns her attention to Mattie, the boat captain, whose seamless coordination of the transportation logistics has allowed the event to proceed without incident. Aoife takes a moment to thank him, acknowledging the smooth operation of the day so far. Mattie, with his usual calm demeanor, shares a few words about how the wedding’s prominence could be a significant marketing opportunity for the island, raising its profile and attracting future attention. Aoife nods, fully aware of the potential this event has to boost the island’s reputation, but there is an underlying caution in her thoughts as well. Despite the current sunny weather, the island is known for its unpredictable climate, and she can't help but anticipate that the serenity could be short-lived. Mattie casually mentions the possibility of an approaching storm, which adds an additional layer of tension to Aoife’s already full plate. She is not only dealing with the logistics and emotional intricacies of the guests but also managing the external forces that the island, with its sudden weather changes, brings into play.

Aoife’s ability to remain calm and collected under pressure is crucial, as she must ensure the wedding continues smoothly regardless of any sudden changes in the environment. This responsibility—balancing the expectations of the guests, the needs of the bride and groom, and the whims of nature—is what truly defines her role as a wedding planner.



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